

Autonomy

by Heat in Freezing

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Summary: The war is over. After over thirty years in the armed services, John retires to the outer colonies with a newly human Cortana. John must learn how to live as a man instead of simply a Spartan, all he has ever known how to be. AU and human!Cortana.

1. Chapter 1

This story is obviously 100% AU. I don't want to write a story predicting what the rest of the Reclaimer saga is going to be because 343 is going to do that much better than I ever could. This story is going to focus on character analysis and relationships. I am currently in the military, so any criticisms or information I use is from my own personal experience. I have read many of the novels and draw a lot from those, particularly elements of John's character and his relationships with other people. I genuinely am not interested in explaining the exact HOW of Cortana becoming human because she doesn't really know either and I feel like it's kind of arbitrary. I figure that's kind of the fun in having an AU. Haha! I hope you all enjoy, gets off to a bit of a slow start but I've got quite a bit more written. (as in, like 60,000 words. Oops, maybe I should've been doing homework. Or not.) Love to hear some reviews, I always respond but I'm not going to withhold content or anything silly like that, I write this for fun and because it makes me happy, I love this universe and I love this pairing. It's also posted on my AO3 account.

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><p>Cortana looked out the window at the seemingly endless fields they lived amongst. She couldn't see much in the distance but John told her he could see the city nearby. The colony they lived on was one of the farthest away from Earth. Because of this, it wasn't

overly populous. It was relatively easy to hide and left properties with open spaces more crowded planets could never afford.<p>

She ran her hand along the windowsill and reflected upon the past year and a half. A year ago they had completed this home. Since then they'd hardly seen another soul and Cortana couldn't help but feel happier than she ever had. It honestly wasn't all that different from their time on the Halo campaign in many ways. It was without a doubt much quieter, but even then it had just been her and John. She knew that there were people out on the rest of the planet, but John really had no concern or desire to seek them out. The few times they had left for something they couldn't have delivered he had been very tense.

She saw John walk to a small outbuilding they'd built carrying what looked to be a large tree trunk over his shoulder with little exertion. She smiled, put on her shoes and went outside.

"What do you plan on doing with that?" she laughed. He dropped the tree on the ground with little caution and crossed his arms.

"I've never slept in a bed big enough for me, I figured now is just as good of a time as any to make one," his tone was rather matter-of-fact. Cortana knew she usually couldn't discern much from the tone of his voice but rather how he moved and his facial expressions. She hadn't realized everything she'd been missing with his face obscured by a visor and his whole body covered in armor. The first month or so of them living together she couldn't stop simply staring at him, almost meeting him all over again. Yes, she had spent a large part of her life existing in his mind and she could still recite his service record verbatim but nothing compared to seeing the crows feet around his eyes, the few and far in between smiles and seeing the years melt away while he worked outside.

He was still very pale but not as ghostly as he was most of his life. He didn't grow his hair out by any means but it was longer than it had been since his service. He shaved whenever he felt like it, usually letting a few days of stubble grow. He had a large scar that started on his chin that went up to his left cheek where hair wouldn't grow and a similar scar through his right eyebrow.

"Can I help?" she smiled.

"Sure, open the shop door and help me check out tools."

John insisted on keeping accurate records of the tools they had amassed for his growing woodworking hobby. Cortana found herself surprised at how much he seemed to enjoy relatively normal tasks-she supposed that perhaps he had enough of excitement.

She turned on the lights and opened up the large shop door. John hefted the tree and set it down on his large work table. Seeing him accomplish such ridiculous physical feats should've seemed odd to her but Cortana really hadn't had much contact with other humans in a while. Even though somewhere in her mind she knew he was nothing short of extraordinary, he was her normal, her standard by which she measured everything. She even had to remind herself that not being able to keep up with him running or in feats of strength was more normal even though her competitive nature told her otherwise.

As he worked, Cortana mostly watched even though she'd hand him a tool here and there. She couldn't help but think about how freeing it was to be able to just exist-she didn't have to constantly process or calibrate information she observed, she could just see it and take it for what it was. As an AI, she would've been compelled to process the angles at which he cut wood, the rounds per minute of the buzzsaw and the exact origins and type of tree he was using.

In a few hours John had fashioned a rustic, sturdy, enormous frame. She and John worked on staining it a dark brown and opened the windows to let the fumes escape. She crossed her arms and admired their work.

"So I suppose we're going to have to go into town to get a mattress for this thing,"

John frowned immediately.

"We could order something and it'd be here in an hour but we just ordered in kitchen appliances and I know you don't want to draw too much attention,"

After John was discharged from the UNSC, he had felt lost and very wary. After effectively ending two wars and saving the entire universe multiple times over, he couldn't help but feel empty and abandoned by the only life he had ever known.

He went as far away as he could from anyone or anything making it very difficult for anyone to find him. He dreamt of fading into obscurity instead of being the savior of the human race. He didn't want anything from the UNSC and as far as Cortana was concerned the UNSC owed John the dignity of a quiet, remote life. John wouldn't voice his opinions as loudly but Cortana could see it in the measures he took to remain hidden. John hated the attention of going into town so he seldom did.

"And unfortunately I can't carry a mattress by myself and if you go by yourself and run home six miles with a mattress it'll seem a little ridiculous so I think you're stuck coming with me."

"Fine," John took out his tablet and made note of the bed frame dimensions while Cortana cleaned up the mess they made building the frame.

John drove quickly. Cortana could tell he was on edge and wanted to get this process done as quickly as possible.

John parked the vehicle roughly in the back of the parking lot. He wore sunglasses to try and hide his distinctive eyes. Cortana thought it was a little pointless because he was almost seven feet tall but she didn't really care if it made him more comfortable.

They walked into the mall complex-it was small for the standards of other planets but it still had plenty of things. It was relatively crowded for the time of day. They reached the interface that would allow them to customize a mattress. Cortana sifted through the hologram looking at various choices and specifications. She felt pretty amazed at the amount of variations that existed on a mattress.

"What do you want in a mattress?"

"For my feet to not hang off and for the frame to not break."

Cortana rolled her eyes.

"Hi, welcome to our furniture emporium, can I help you two decide anything?" The associate was well dressed and seemed like a nice-enough twenty-some year old man.

"Sure," Cortana smiled. She handled situations like this well, she actually liked talking to people despite living in the middle of nowhere. "As you can see, myâ€|" she paused. It wasn't a big deal to live together and be unmarried but she couldn't think of a word that described their relationship. "We are looking for a bed that he can sleep," she rephrased, "He is rather tall, John could you hand me the tablet,"

Cortana looked up at him and he didn't really seem phased by her referring to him as her husband. He produced their tablet and Cortana leaned over to show the associate. "You see, we need these measurements."

He looked at the specifications and nodded. "Okay, that's entirely doable. Do you know what you want for firmness?"

"Not really," Cortana shrugged.

"How do you both sleep?"

"I sleep on my side," Cortana answered quickly. She looked at John.

Without looking down or making eye contact he spoke, "I sleep on my back," he said effectively to the air above the associate's head. Cortana held back a sigh. She could tell he was oddly nervous about this excursion out, he hated attention. He wasn't really what she'd call shy but he was a man of concision; if he could say something in a few direct words he would.

The associate proceeded to make a bunch of recommendations until they chose something agreeable.

"Should be ready in an hour, help yourself to refreshments in our waiting area,"

John stood perfectly still and looked straight ahead. It made Cortana feel fidgety. She ran her hand down his arm and grabbed his hand.

"What's wrong? It's all fine," she traced the outline of his palm with her fingertips in a way she knew he found comforting.

"I just have a weird feeling."

Cortana frowned. John's feelings were always grounded in some reason. His instinct was almost always correct.

"Bad weird?"

"No," he paused. "Just weird weird."

"Chief,"

Cortana almost saw it happen in slow motion. John stiffened and turned to see a tall, well dressed woman. Her brown hair was pulled back in a loose braid that draped over her right shoulder. Her most prominent feature was her large, wide-set spartan blue-green eyes.

Cortana could tell John was shocked which was really saying something-very few things surprised him. Cortana looked at the woman once more and picked her brain. Before Cortana could place exactly who she was, John spoke.

"...Kelly," he spoke quietly. Well, that must've been John's weird feeling.

Cortana watched as Kelly reacted very oddly to John's presence. She looked like she was on the verge of tears and laughter all in one, an odd expression on a Spartan's face. In three long strides she made her way to John just stared at him.

Kelly pulled away and looked John square in the face, she took off his glasses and looked directly into his eyes. Kelly shed a tear when she found whatever she was looking for.

"It really is you, I thoughtâ€|" she paused and wiped at her eyes, her lip quivered. "I don't know what I thought, but I didn't think that you'd be here of all places." She took a deep breath and quickly composed herself. "You have to come to my house."

Cortana was feeling a little ignored at this point. John looked at her, clearly wanting her thoughts. Kelly glanced at her and noticed her for the first time.

"Who is-"

"Later," Cortana spoke, smiling at the other woman. "We'll come over after we're done here. Put the coordinates of your home here," Cortana handed her a tablet.

Kelly handed John the tablet after putting in the location.

"Alright, your mattress is on a hovercart near the front of the store," the associate paused. He looked from John to Kelly and back again. "Oh is this your sister?" Kelly tensed up a little bit.

John answered without hesitation. "Yes. Yes she is."

2. Chapter 2

John was silent for most the the trip to Kelly's home. Cortana couldn't really get a read on what he was feeling. They pulled into the drive near the home-it was much larger than their abode. John turned off the vehicle but didn't look like he was about to move.

"What's on your mind?" Cortana had found that simply asking was usually the most productive option.

John looked down and ran his hands over his knees, a nervous habit he'd acquired.

"I don't know what this kind of situation this is. I never could've seen myself acting in such a social way with other people, let alone us Spartans. I don't know what to expect from her and how much she's changed. I don't know what normal is anymore."

"Normal is always changing, whatever this is will become the new normal. That being said, you have to leave some room for those adjustments. I'm sure a lot has changed for her too." "I don't know what normal ever has been," he said quietly.

Cortana frowned slightly. She knew that he had very few memories from before he was conscripted into the Spartan program. He had confessed one night he didn't even remember his birth mother's face, only her voice. He had no memories of a father, perhaps he had been a military man who was deployed for most of the insurrection.

John never lamented these things, Cortana knew that it genuinely didn't bother him. It bothered her because she knew. Knowing his past was what had initially made her so fiercely swear to protect him at any cost.

Cortana rested a hand on John's shoulder. "This is a new part of our lives and we both have a lot of new normals to find I mean, I didn't have a body until a little bit ago, and you'd been in the military since you were six. We're making adjustments, I think we can handle dinner."

John sighed and smiled the tiniest bit-Cortana only noticed because she was used to reading his subtle facial expressions. "You always know what to say."

Her face lit up, she smiled and leaned over, kissing him softly on the cheek. "Of course I do, now let's go!" She hopped out of the car excitedly. She couldn't help but be excited at the notion of social interaction like this.

Kelly opened the door and invited them in, Cortana could tell simply by her body language how excited she was though she doubted most people would see it that way. She bounced a little when she walked. She didn't look younger than John but she had a distinctive energy about her Cortana couldn't help but notice.

The home was not at all what Cortana expected. The walls were painted calming greys of varying shades, the lightest being close to white and some being closer to a steely blue. What shocked her was what had to be nearly fifty framed photos all over the entryway and leading to what seemed to be a dining area and sitting room.

Cortana looked up at the pictures. The vantage point for every single one was surreal and strange, the focuses of each picture were strange but poetic in some sense-an explosion that focused on individual grains of sand, a single flag flapping in the wind atop a hill, dog tags of fallen soldiers.

John paused and saw a photo of a firefight where a worse-for-the-wear Spartan pointed forward and shot as if indicating an order. Before John could stop himself he touched the photograph, his hand running over the Spartan tag 117 emblazoned on the armor of the pointing Spartan.

"How is this-"

"I took them," a quiet voice spoke. John's eyes widened slightly.

"Fred?"

Cortana eyed the other Spartan. He looked oddly normal in comparison to John and Kelly. His hair was streaked grey which looked odd for how young he appeared otherwise. The years had been a little kinder to him than they were to John. He could probably even blend in with a crowd.

Kelly smiled her soft, serene smile. "Please sit," she gestured to the overly large sofa.

The four of them all sat. Cortana could feel their Spartan eyes all over her asking all the questions she knew they were thinking. Cortana started to feel a little awkward about all of the tension in the room.

Fred sighed. "I don't even know where to begin."

"This is a lot," agreed Kelly.

"Well why don't we start," Cortana ignored the relatively somber atmosphere. She could tell John was on edge by the tension he held in his shoulders.

"Who is she, what does she know?" Kelly asked, very obviously directing her question at John. Cortana crossed her arms and huffed. John couldn't help but chuckle slightly.

"Oh I'm just some random female he picked up the minute he hit the ground on this planet on the fringe of the galaxy, it's so weird how tall all you guys are, John, you've never told me about any family you might have, are you related?" Cortana rolled her eyes. The two Spartans in front of her seemed very confused by her remarks, she couldn't tell if the sarcasm was lost on them and they actually believed her story or if they were just not used to someone as obnoxious as she.

"She does that sometimes," Cortana could hear his smile in his voice. "This is Cortana, she knows everything and more, she was my AI."

Fred's eyes widened. "How is such a thing possible?"

"It's very complicated but possible." Cortana sighed, she didn't quite understand the mechanics of what had happened to her after Requiem.

"Cortana sacrificed herself for me near the end of my career." John

looked down. "After the events of New Phoenix, I was broken in a way that I'd never been before. In my grief I went AWOL to try and make sense of Cortana's death. Afterwards I was retired."

Cortana reached over and grabbed John's hand.

Kelly and Fred looked shocked. "I had heard the rumors but I didn't know if they could possibly be true. I would've never...It doesn't make sense." murmured Kelly.

Cortana shrugged a little. "Things like love seldom make sense."

"Loveâ€|" Fred sighed and Kelly crossed her legs a little awkwardly.

"Around the time you must've retired, Fred and myself were told that remaining Spartan-IIs would be retired and given compensation along with a pension by order of Admiral Osman."

"As an officer, I found that the Spartan-II program was considered a blemish on the UNSC, a terrible reminder of decisions made in desperate times and action was being taken to render a different image. With Admiral Osman, who is actually Serin-019, heading ONI, she wanted us effectively out of the force."

John's eyes widened a little. "Serinâ€|" he trailed off, remembering his fellow Spartan who had appeared to die from augmentation procedures, at least according to his memory. Then again, he couldn't recall her being memorialized at the ceremony they'd had either.

"So, Kelly and myself were served papers. She was discharged the day before me, the day I was discharged we got married."

Kelly handed a picture to John and Cortana. They were clearly on Earth, it looked as if nothing had been spared in military fanfare. Kelly wore a white, knee length sheath dress and Fred a black suit and jacket. Neither were smiling, but there was a softness to each of them that seemed happy.

Kelly laughed a little, "That was the first time I ever wore a dress."

"It was highly publicized, broadcast and mandatory viewing for all UNSC personnel. It was meant to be something that kind of closed the book on the Spartan-II program, theyâ€|" Kelly reached under the table and grabbed a photo album and handed it to John. "They released all of these photos to make the program more transparent."

John flipped through the book and saw pictures of things he hardly remembered. There were pictures of all seventy-five of them with freshly shaven heads, a picture of a little boy Spartan sleeping on his cot sucking his thumb, a boy who, after a moment, he recognized as himself. A picture of them lined up at fourteen for augmentations. Obstacle courses with children, weapons training at ten, the barracks they slept in. A picture of all of them with Chief Mendez, no smiles and stern. Even pictures of them learning calculus from Deja.

"Here's my favorite," Kelly flipped to a picture. Three children eating together, sitting on the ground, faces dirty and boots caked in mud. It was John, Kelly and Sam at what must've been eight years old. Kelly had an almost comical frown on her face, her hair in front of her, Sam was clearly telling a story of some sort. John neither frowned or smiled, he was looking off into the distance.

"Always so serious," Cortana smiled a little. John touched Sam's face as if he could somehow connect to him through the photo.

"Could I have a copy of this?"

"Take that one, I have another." she spoke quietly, her voice a little pained.

"So after we were discharged we were placed here. It's remote and quiet, something we both wanted."

"What made you decide to get married?" John questioned. It seemed odd to him, his relationship with Cortana was unlike anything he'd ever experienced but marriage was a concept difficult for him to imagine.

Fred and Kelly looked away from each other.

"When we filled out paperwork for where we wanted to be placed, we only requested to be placed together. After everything, I couldn't imagine being alone without other Spartans. It was hard to fit in with the new Spartan-IVs, I felt somewhat outdated and excluded even when they tried to include me. I couldn't imagine being alone." Cortana felt badly for her, her worst fear was also loneliness. Her years on the Dawn were some of the darkest in her life. She had spent it thinking herself into madness and hating John while simultaneously loving him. It had been excruciating. The loneliness could consume someone.

"They told us they couldn't guarantee our placement together unless we were married so it was the clear choice to make." Fred spoke with a stiffness that was a little strange. Even though they were a little more talkative than John was, Cortana could tell that affection was awkward and difficult between the two of them.

"What is...what's love? How can you tell?" Kelly spoke directly but quietly looking to John.

Cortana looked at him and saw a small flush rising up his neck.

"I think it's different for everyone Kelly," Cortana answered evenly. "There aren't really rules or a checklist."

"We have dealt with much loss in our lives, that is the life of the soldier. Some losses felt debilitating," he remembered Kelly's tears when Sam had died, his anger, determination and the raw pain he had experienced.

"But when I lost Cortana I was completely broken. I tried to rationalize it; what had happened made our mission succeed and she had fulfilled her primary objective, she had sacrificed herself the same way Sam had and it was noble, it was what she wanted," he looked at Cortana, her short dark hair and pale skin, the slight freckles

that dotted the bridge of her nose.

"It didn't work. I couldn't make sense of it. My life had lost any meaning, everything around me was wrong. I was separated from all of the Spartans for years following Reach but I had always had her. I was never lonely because of her. She existed as part of me and myself a part of her. I had experienced love before, love for my Spartan brothers and sisters, love of humanity and gratitude towards Catherine," John seldom spoke at length in this manner and Cortana couldn't help but feel pained by his expression as he recalled his time without her. "But losing her ruined me. Losing her taught me everything."

Fred and Kelly looked at each other, clearly analyzing their feelings and relationship in that moment. Cortana felt a little uncomfortable. She assumed they had a hard time dealing with seemingly mundane things like feelings-John had for the longest time until Requiem seemed to change everything.

"Thank you for sharing with us John." Kelly smiled softly at him. "That helps. We are glad you're happy and that civilian life suits you as much as it seems to. I never would've expected that out of all of us you'd do so well civilian side."

Fred's expression softened a little bit. "What do you do to fill your time?"

"John and I live a bit out of town, we try to make as many things we can. It's been an adjustment because I had never owned anything and anything John had was given to him by the UNSC. I like to garden and sit in the sunlight because eating and even feeling the wind in my hair is magical to me." She ran her hands over the soft fabric of the couch just thinking about the sensation.

"I like making things and reading things. I've never been able to read for leisure and learn anything I could ever want. I like working with wood." He leaned into the couch the slightest bit, finally relaxing into the conversation a little bit.

"What are you two doing here in the outer colonies?" questioned Cortana politely.

"I actually teach at a primary school. I coach the high school track team and distance running team. I'm not nearly as fast as I was because I injured a calf muscle but obviously I'm still the fastest. Don't show the kids that though." She laughed. "I feel comfortable around children because they accept that I'm just the way I am, they ask questions and I answer them and we move on. It's simple and nice."

"I take photos. When the UNSC declassified a lot of information about the Spartan-II program, a museum on Earth called and asked to display my photos in a series. I enjoy the idea of seeing a moment in time displayed how I saw it and that is what my work has become for me. It brings me fulfillment."

"They are amazing photos for sure," Cortana praised. They were poignant and Cortana could tell they really displayed a specific viewpoint, a Spartan viewpoint. "I love the one you took of John."

"Take it home with you, please, a gift." he smiled a little.

They continued to talk into the night, only pausing for Fred to get up for food and drinks. John had been happy living with just Cortana-she was all he truly needed, but the happiness he felt seeing Kelly and Fred alive and doing as well as they could be fulfilled him in some way. They were his family, his brother and sister and they only brought light into his life.

Kelly sipped on a glass of wine, flushing a little bit as it warmed her up.

"So I was on a mission with a Spartan-IV fireteam," Fred chuckled a little bit already knowing where the story was going. "And I'm telling you, John they are so loud. They think they're quiet but they're just very chatty. So this male who thinks he's a real hotshot and must be at least ten years younger than me is chatting while we walk through the jungles of Victoria, not a very pleasant place. I didn't realize it initially, but he was hitting on me this entire mission, something I'd never really experienced." She looked down, slightly demure as if the memory still embarrassed her.

"Talking, joking making wisecracks, he even made a joke about how tall I was which was...strange. He didn't noticed when an Elite walked up right behind him, nearly sliced him in two with a plasma sword until I rushed him, took the sword and sliced the Sanghelli in half." She started laughing in earnest. "I would've paid to see his face under his HUD, he didn't talk to me for the rest of the mission, I don't know if he was embarrassed or intimidated but it was ridiculous."

"The Spartan branch has a lot of self. It's made largely of ODSTs who at times lack discipline and professionalism necessary for many situations. As a commanding officer in the last five years of my career I served more letters of reprimand than I ever could've thought possible. We were so different from them," Fred sighed. "That being said, everyone chose to be a Spartan and there is merit in that. There is spirit in many of them that can be admirable and sometimes I would feel envious at their ability to serve the UNSC and themselves."

Cortana could once again feel tension in the air. John very seldom spoke of his feelings. Cortana didn't really know how he felt about the Spartan program as a whole and never really asked him.

After a small moment of silence, Kelly spoke up.

"We didn't choose the life we had, but we were chosen to protect mankind. To serve and protect Earth and her colonies in the capacity we did is something people could only dream of. As difficult as this civilian life may be, adjusting to a life of normalcy, I am happy. Some days are hard, sometimes I don't know what to do with myself. But this is the life I have been given. Many others are gone and it would be shameful to not live the life I still have." She spoke with her chin high, her eyes strong and unrelenting.

Cortana couldn't help but think of a Queen when she looked at the noble female Spartan. Over the years she would never fail to remember just how amazing the Spartans were, their ideals and strength

embodied the qualities that made Cortana fall in love with humanity. The ironic part was it was hard for them to accept their place in humanity among others, the way John avoided seeing another living soul besides herself-she wouldn't use the word afraid, but he was very anxious.

"That begs the question though, what do you want from this life? The rest of it, that is." Cortana asked.

Kelly looked to Fred, a flush spreading over her face.

"It's complicated." Fred spoke quietly. John seemed to not mind moving on from the subject but Cortana was too overtaken by her curious nature.

"Try me, I don't usually have trouble with complex things." She smiled.

Fred and Kelly looked to one another and Kelly sighed.

"We very much would like to have a child," she said quietly. It sounded like she felt guilty wanting such a thing, like it was something taboo or shameful.

John felt uncomfortable. He'd never thought of the idea of children, he'd hardly come into contact with children and he couldn't imagine a life being a father. He also found it strange that it was something Kelly and Fred so clearly desired, the thought never really had crossed his mind.

Cortana smiled. "Well that's great, if that's what would make you happy you should!"

Fred and Kelly stared at her, clearly confused and honestly the closest she'd seen to irritated the whole evening. Clearly she was missing something.

"It's hard for us toâ€¦" Kelly trailed off, Fred turned away. Cortana started to fill in the blanks.

"In all honesty, as much as we would like a child, we never really want to have sex, we've tried once and it wasn't...It didn'tâ€¦" Fred clearly stumbling over his words, feeling extremely uncomfortable.

Kelly looked from Cortana to John. "Surely you understand,"

John ran a hand through his hair, a little flustered.

Cortana felt herself get warm. No, no problems there. She recalled evenings of fevered touches, panting breath and ardently whispered declarations. He was intensely physical and Cortana never felt more alive than when she was wrapped up in him, never more safe. Touch was everything to her.

"Actually, not really." Cortana spoke quietly. She saw a clear sting of hurt run across the faces of Kelly and Fred.

"So it's just usâ€¦" Kelly said. She looked close to tears.

"No, it isn't, I have a theory on this actually." Cortana spoke quickly. "John would be the same as you two due to the thyroid implant you all received to increase your muscle mass, height and essentially extend your puberty. However, when John was on Requiem," Cortana proceeded to describe the events that John had undergone with the Librarian. "So while we don't know exactly what happened with the Librarian, his genetic makeup changed entirely. I theorize that his augmentations and changes were made a part of his genetic code as opposed to things that augmented him physically. This alleviated some of the side-effects of the augmentation procedures, theoretically."

Cortana had never really spoken to John about this but their physical relationship was really what made her start to think about it.

"It is true that everything changed for me after Requiem. I gradually felt a change and it would make sense with what Cortana hypothesizes." John spoke quietly but also in what Cortana perceived as a comforting manner, trying to tell Kelly and Fred it wasn't all on them.

"That is a little comforting but it still leaves us with no solution," Kelly spoke softly.

"I think there is help that can be offered to you. You may not know this even though it was the worst kept secret in the UNSC but my origins lie with Dr. Halsey. My processing matrix came from a flash clone of her brain. When I was created, I processed the entirety of human knowledge in the first few seconds of my existence. Needless to say, I know a thing or two. There is definitely science that can help you. Humans have hormonal imbalances all the time, even normal ones that aren't Spartans. I bet you could go to a doctor or specialist right here in Lamnda Aurige System to help you. This is a rather human problem and nothing to feel shameful about, both of you have confronted much worse. This just seems harder because you are perceiving it as a problem with yourselves individually instead of an obstacle to simply overcome."

Fred's face seemed to soften slightly. "I don't know why the thought never occurred to us. I've just never had to deal with such a personal failure."

"It's perfectly logical, as a Spartan your body has been your tool and is considered the height of perfection-for you to be incapable of a physical task seems wrong and disturbing. For me, having a body capable of doing anything was amazing but not being able to process all of the information I once was able to was hard to deal with. I worried irrational things-that John wouldn't want me any longer since I wasn't as useful to him, that I would feel stupid or grow restless, but all of these concerns ended up being irrational. And I can speak for myself and John that you both don't have to feel isolated or alone, you can talk to the both of us. I'm no Spartan but for years I lived primarily inside of John's consciousness, some things I do I wonder if it's me or him, and I'm sure he feels similarly about me," she laughed a little bit thinking it might annoy him a little. "But the fact of the matter is you have us and we have you now." Cortana reached forward to grab the hands of both Kelly and Fred and smiled at them, ignoring their slight jump at her casual physical contact.

Kelly's eyes softened and the nicest, most gentle smile appeared on her face. "I can understand why you did what you did for her."

Cortana knew that in a word she would describe Kelly and Fred as kind. They were good people. She smiled and looked to John. John nodded. "I would do it again. Whatever it took."

Cortana smiled and grabbed his hand tightly. "You sure know how to make a girl smile." Of course that was an understatement. He made her glow, made her crazy and sane all in a moment. The entirety of her existence pointed to him. She chose him and he had later chosen her.

They talked until the sun had set. The Spartans showed no real sign of fatigue but Cortana yawned loudly.

"It's been a long day, even though it's not that late, and we still have that mattress to carry in." Cortana stretched her arms over her head in a stretch.

"My team has a track meet tomorrow, it's the last of the academic year. You should come, it's amazing how children thrive in these times of peace." Kelly invited.

Cortana stood along with John moving towards the door. "We will come, are you at the big track downtown?" Kelly grabbed John's tablet and wrote down a time date and coordinates.

Cortana looked at John and she could tell he felt a little uneasy. "It'll be fine, Kelly's twin brother just moved to the system and wanted to see the meet," Cortana stated. Fred smiled.

"An entirely plausible scenario," agreed Kelly. Cortana looked between the two of them. She could see it, even discounting their distinctly Spartan features-they both had a similar shade of brown hair, though John's was a little more reddish, and strong features with fair, slightly freckled skin. Most people didn't stare at scars considering many people who'd served in the UNSC had similar scars and Kelly and John didn't have any very severe facial scarring.

"I will be there with Cortana tomorrow." Cortana smiled knowing he wouldn't say that if he didn't mean it.

They drove home in silence, their tiny, sleepy home visible in the light from the two moons that orbited their planet. The river that flowed not far from their house sounded wonderful in the night air.

John quickly maneuvered their new mattress into their home and Cortana made the bed with the new bedding they'd purchased. She ran her hand over the comforter and she sighed. "It's so soft!" She exclaimed, still finding herself fascinated with the sensation of touch.

She changed into her nightclothes. John preferred to sleep simply in shorts. She turned off their bedside lamp and crawled into their new bed. She loved when moonlight streamed into their bedroom late in the night.

She sighed. John laid on his back looking up through the skylights on their ceiling. The moonlight created shadows on his face. Cortana wrapped herself around him, their legs tangling together under the sheets. She twined her hand with his. They sat quietly for a few minutes in a comfortable silence.

Cortana breathed deeply. She reached up to John's face and palmed his cheek. He turned into her hand and looked upon her face.

"I love you," she whispered. She felt proud of him and his ability to speak so freely with Fred and Kelly. To let himself love her the way he had, everything he had given her was all she had in this life.

He ran his large hand through her short hair. Cortana couldn't help but sigh at how good it felt. He kissed her, his hand tightening and gripping at her hair while another ran underneath her nightclothes and up her thigh. His rough hands on her bare skin made her feel slightly dazed, goosebumps erupted all over her skin. She always found herself surprised that despite his strength he was a gentle, intense lover, not that she'd really know anything to compare him to.

She wrapped her leg around him and pressed her body into his, wrapping an arm behind his neck and running a hand from his jawline to his shoulder, all the way to his hand that she grabbed and put on her breast. She tugged at his shorts until he helped her take them off. She ran her hands down his chest and pulled her nightgown over her head and threw it aside.

Everytime they were together she was floored by the overall intensity of the experience. She had lived as one with him, knew his thoughts and feelings until they became her own. Living life as a human she lost that connection to him. She never would've imagined that sex would not only compare but create a closeness to him she'd never been able to imagine. When he moved over her she could feel him again, she couldn't hear his thoughts but she could see into his eyes and see how he felt, she couldn't analyze his vitals but she could feel his heartbeat in his chest, more real and vital than any number she could've interpreted.

She could've never imagined the pleasure she would feel when she was with him-as an AI she could process the entire human experience and break down the human sexual cycle, divided into four phases it was, excitement, plateau, orgasm and resolution. An orgasm was simply a release in sexual tension, a response to sexual stimulation that resulted in an oxytocin, prolactin and endorphin rush. To an AI, it was simply a moment, a blip on the radar. She knew she had been missing something, that the entirety of the human race wouldn't write, sing, create and die simply for a moment if there wasn't more.

She never knew how it would make her toes curl, her muscles spasm, her heart race as if it would beat out of her very chest, how she'd cry out his name with total abandon, how he would collapse onto her and she'd feel his heart against her bare skin, how she would feel him murmur her name against her neck more than she'd hear it. It was the clearest, purest connection anyone could share with another, every time she felt as if she was being torn apart and being remade anew with him, something they could only truly create together. In a moment they could create a world of safety, trust and love that could

only be felt and never described.

She held herself close to him, catching her breath and clinging to him. She couldn't get enough of how his skin felt against her's, how he smelled, how their rumpled sheets felt against her fevered skin, it was all more than she could've ever imagined. She allowed herself to run her hands desperately over his arms, feeling raised scars interrupt his smooth skin, she closed her eyes and listened to him breathe, it was her life, the religion she lived by, everything she would ever want or need was him.

She fell asleep in his arms.

* * *

><p>This story starts out a little fluffy (which can be nice) but eventually starts to deal with more of the issues they will have adapting to civilian life. I will start to flesh out Fred and Kelly's characters as well. I hope that you will enjoy my interpretation of their characters! :D They're probably my favorites, they fascinate me.<p>

3. Chapter 3

In the middle of the night, John woke up to Cortana screaming and thrashing wildly.

"Cortana," he whispered softly, trying to shake her from whatever nightmare she seemed trapped in without scaring her. She seemed to hear his voice but was too focused on whatever she was screaming about. He said her name again.

She gasped and sat up straight in the bed but she seemed to still be dreaming. She grabbed hold of him suddenly, shuddering and shaking the entire time. She sounded like she was close to hyperventilating.

"We exist together, two corpses in one grave," she whispered to herself, shaking violently.

John couldn't understand how deeply her time with the Gravemind had affected her, the events of Requiem had followed so quickly that he never truly learned the damage she had sustained. When she would wake herself like this he felt helpless and even afraid.

He sat up and pulled her with him, drawing her to his chest. She rested her cheek against his chest, eyes still wide and remembering her torment. He ran a hand down her back.

"It's okay," he tried to speak in a comforting way but he didn't really know how. He couldn't understand what it was like to battle with something that wasn't real-things either were or weren't to him. He could say it was okay because it was, that was reality, but whatever she was experiencing was real to her even if it wasn't real to him.

"You found meâ€|" she whispered.

"I did," he agreed.

"But so much of me is wrong," she continued. She was saying the same words she'd said all those years ago. "Out of place. You might be too late."

Failure. He had been late, too late to save her from the damage she sustained. He'd never felt such failure. She had held onto the index and been strong for humanity, she had done her part and he had failed her. He was supposed to take care of her, and this was only the first time he had failed, he would fail her after the Gravemind on Requiem. And she still came back.

"Nothing about you is wrong, nothing is out of place. We are here, in our tiny home. Together." Facts. The only thing he knew he could fall back on were facts. If he could just make it so for her.

She let out a shuddering sigh and he knew she'd snapped out of whatever she was dealing with. She started to cry. He didn't say anything, he just held her while she cried.

Her sobs slowed and she pulled away from him. She rubbed at her red eyes.

"I'm sorry, this is ridiculous." she took in a shaky breath.

"No, it's not. At the time, the mission had to take precedence over your status. But now there isn't a mission." He covered her tiny hand with his large hand, running his thumb over it.

She sat quietly for a moment and suddenly ran a hand over a plasma scar on his shoulder. She remembered almost every scar of one rippled over his shoulder and his clavicle. It looked brutal and Cortana remembered it distinctly. The scars that she bore from the war were less visible.

She felt guilty about her memories of the war. Because he was just so damn strong, like he had to be. Because she was ruined inside. She hadn't been strong enough two times over and had cost John everything.

"I've admired your strength, your strength to just move on despite the things you've seen and done. I find myself reflecting on how ruined I feel inside despite my outwardly flawless body. Inside, I still cannot move past what happened on High Charity." It was true. He never woke up in a sweat, he never cried out in his sleep, he never saw something and flinched because it reminded him of something. He was brave, he was strong and Cortana envied him. In most ways she had always felt like they were a team, that she could help him in ways that he couldn't help himself. As a human, she felt like she was the weaker, sadder one of what had once been the best team the UNSC had ever seen.

John thought before he spoke, "To start, I would be much worse off without you. I have more injuries from my teen years and the insurrection than a lot of the Halo Campaign where you were what kept me safe."

She wiped her eyes and shivered, a time where she hadn't been around to protect John, to save him. It terrified her.

He continued, "All of that being said, physical ailments are often easier to deal with. I don't think about it anymore, they don't hurt me chronically. What happened to you is different."

She ran a hand through her hair and exhaled a frustrated sigh. "I was arrogant, I felt that it shouldn't have affected me the way it did, that I was strong enough to endure. All I could think of over and over again was keeping the index a secret. I did that by flooding myself with memories and thoughts of you." she whispered. "Over and over I fantasized about a time we could be together and take care of each other, what it'd be like to touch you," she trailed off a little.

"When you found me, you and your promise were all that tethered me to reality, the only thing that allowed me to pull it all together and help you save everything. After that, I didn't feel like an AI anymore and that's why the events on Requiem were so hard for me. I was starting to feel more and more like a person."

She looked at his face, she could tell he was still concerned. "I will get better. I am happier than I've ever been and I have you. And now we have Kelly and Fred who depend on us."

John looked a little uncomfortable at the reminder.

"What's on your mind?" Cortana asked. She leaned back into the pillows, which she preferred many of, opposed to John who preferred none or one, and propped herself up. John leaned back. Cortana smiled, the bed didn't creak at all under his weight, definitely a good buy.

"I am conflicted about how I feel about seeing Fred and Kelly again. They are some of the only siblings and family I have ever known. Yet I feel responsible for them and I selfishly enjoyed being able to disappear the way we have," He paused. "They also confuse me slightly. I don't know what a child between the two of them would even mean."

Cortana laughed a little. "Once they have some things figured out between the two of them I'm sure they'll be fine parents if that's what they want," she shrugged a little and smirked. "Besides, who's a perfect, ready parent anyways. Their child will be well protected, educated, adorable and most importantly loved. That's all that really matters, the rest will work itself out."

Cortana yawned again. "I'm sorry for waking you," she whispered, snuggling under the covers again, getting ready to try sleeping again.

She felt him shake his head. "Never," he responded quietly. Never feel ashamed, always wake me, were the unspoken words. He wrapped his arms around her the way he knew she enjoyed, even though he much preferred sleeping on his back. She smiled and snuggled into him. She heard his breathing even out indicating he'd fallen asleep. He could fall asleep quickly anytime, anywhere. Cortana struggled a little more with sleeping, she would continue to make lists and think about the day, be it good or bad. It was worse after nightmares.

I have John, and John is everything. She fell asleep.

Cortana woke up the next morning to an empty bed. She'd sprawled all over and messed up all of the sheets. She almost always woke up alone, John didn't need half the amount of sleep she did, especially now that he was sleeping consistently. She smiled seeing dust particles in the sunlight streaming through the skylight.

She got up and opened her tiny closet. She rather enjoyed dressing herself and clothes. She picked some tapered pants and a button-up blouse. She liked the metal buttons and the fabric of his particular blouse. She usually liked clothing with panels that were rather simple but of nice quality.

She went into their newly furnished kitchen and touched the panel on the wall that would make her morning pot of coffee. She had convinced John they needed real appliances that worked on the same system, finally. She had to admit, she was in love. So much easier. Usually John would come inside and join her for coffee from whatever he was doing outside. He had her routine committed to memory.

Cortana sat down and pulled up the newspaper, it reflected upwards off the table as she paged through it.

John walked in and grabbed the brewed coffee for the both of them, pouring them mugs. Cortana smiled when he leaned in to kiss her good morning-usually he wasn't quite so affectionate but she could tell he still felt shaken by how upset she had been last night.

"It's a real surprise we didn't see this, there's an entire press release," she scanned the news and found a story from about six months ago featuring Fred and Kelly's wedding.

John looked up slightly. Cortana laughed. "Listen to this, doesn't get more UNSC public affairs than this:

>"Both Spartans met as children and fought alongside each other in over one hundred campaigns that helped turn the tide of the Human-Covenant War and the War of Insurrection. Spartan Kelly stated that they both 'share the same commitment to Earth and her colonies, so it strengthens our commitment to each other.' she is wearing a white designer knee length gown gifted to her by Admiral Osman. Perhaps she will bring back the once popular wedding color white. Spartan Fred has a photo series that will be featured at the Museum of Living Arts on Earth in New York City. Spartan Fred plans to continue work photographing subjects that interest him while Spartan Kelly has completed her teaching certification via correspondence with the University of Edinburgh. She has been hired as a teacher in the Lamnda Aurige Public School System."
Cortana sighed. "I like how they leave their Spartan tags off because that re-emphasizes that they were taken away from their families. I also like the part where they say they met as children, it's almost funny. There's no mention of you, you have a press release somewhere that says you've retired to an undisclosed location."

"We were conscripted," he corrected. He never thought of it as 'being taken from his family,' serving as a Spartan was the highest honor. "I don't really care," he grumbled. "I've never done anything I've done for glory or recognition. The best gift the UNSC could give me is to leave me to live out my 'retirement' unless there is another imminent threat to humanity."

Cortana smiled. "Well you are the most decorated soldier in the

history of the UNSC, but it is just so military the way you've been swept under the rug."

"It's worse that you will never receive credit for everything you've done. I hate ceremony and fanfare, this is the best possible outcome I could've asked for myself."

Cortana felt warm at his praise. "You know that the UNSC would still probably not consider me a human, let alone when I was an AI. It's okay, I really don't mind. I suppose this is the best possible outcome for either of us."

"What time is Kelly's event?" he asked as he leaned back a little in his chair.

"The track meet? Around 1400, we should leave by 1300 so we can get there and get a seat, Kelly sent a message that we can sit by her and her team." Cortana grinned. She liked seeing human customs and events, it was something she wasn't entirely familiar with.

John went upstairs and changed into his running shoes.

"Where are you heading?" she asked, looking up from the book she was reading.

"Base of the mountain and back," he grunted.

He must have a lot on his mind, longer run than usual.

"Okay, I'll be here," she smiled. He closed the door a little harder than normal as he left and Cortana frowned. She couldn't help but worry about him when he was like this but usually a run cleared his head.

She pulled out her comm tab and typed a message to Kelly. _Talked to John, we'll be there at 1400, we are very excited to see your students excell!_ She smiled. The idea of having a female friend was somewhat exciting to her, even if it might seem a little silly.

Kelly responded quickly. _I will save you seats next to mine and let officials know my brother and you are attending._ She smiled. Even though she and John weren't married and she wasn't sure if it was something John cared to do, the idea of going out and appearing like a married couple put a spring in her step. Kelly also sounded just like John, concise and to the point with no extraneous information. Cortana supposed she'd always been unorthodox and perhaps a little obnoxious but she didn't really care.

Cortana busied herself with as many tasks as she could but she couldn't stop thinking about going into town for the track meet. Until she was confronted with having friends she didn't know how much she'd wanted some.

John came back from his run about an hour and a half later. He was sweating quite a bit and without speaking a word to her went to go shower. This wasn't very unusual, he usually was deep in thought after he ran and Cortana was glad he found it calming.

Cortana put vegetables from their garden in the kitchen and some

chicken breast for a salad. She pressed a few buttons on their control unit and everything started cooking.

John came in from their bedroom dressed in new clothes, he was wearing a Black t-shirt and some grey pants. He ran a hand through his still damp hair and sat down, grabbing himself a bowl of salad and plenty of meat.

"This is really good," he commented as he ate.

Cortana smiled. "Yeah I agree, this crop of radishes is a lot better than the last one." She took a fair amount of pride in the small garden she'd started outside, it was a very instantly gratifying hobby.

He ate so quickly but still very politely. He got up and took their plates into the kitchen. He checked his watch.

"We should get going if we're going to be on time," he said grabbing his wallet and putting it in his pocket.

"Alright, I'm going to grab our sunglasses in case we're facing the sun," she knew it didn't really bother him but her eyes were a little sensitive.

They got in their vehicle and Cortana punched in the coordinates Kelly had given them.

The stadium was huge and there were hundreds of kids in uniforms stretching and cheering. John felt a little overwhelmed. He was surprised when no one really took time to stare at him because they were so busy doing their own pre-meet rituals.

"John!" He heard Kelly yell and wave them over. She towered over the crowd of teenagers that surrounded her, even the tallest boy was at least five inches shorter than her. She was holding a clipboard and wearing a fitted zip jacket and pants with a whistle around her neck. Her hair was pulled into a ponytail. Ironically enough, the school mascot appeared to be The Spartans and John couldn't help but smile a little.

John and Cortana went and sat where Kelly had put her things, Fred was buzzing around and clicking pictures of the team. Once again Cortana was surprised at how normal he could look. John and Kelly stuck out much more and she couldn't really place why exactly. Maybe his movements and facial expressions were a little less severe.

An announcement played and everyone stood for the anthem. John, Kelly and Fred all saluted since it was outside. Cortana looked around, there were not many UNSC personnel attending, at least compared to the general attendance.

"Why don't you salute?" asked John after the anthem was done.

"Please, I'm no soldier, I didn't go through basic training and I was created from a civilian doctor," she laughed.

"Technically I didn't go through basic training," he said quietly.

Cortana started to laugh in earnest. Fred smiled in the slightest.

"Alright everyone, rally up!"

It was strange to hear Kelly shout, she was normally very soft spoken. Her team quickly circled around her.

"Does everyone know what they're running or throwing today?" she said a little dryly. A few kids raised their hands asking questions and she read off their various events.

"Okay, huddle in," she said. The students all huddled together for what John assumed was a pep talk.

"I know I've only had you guys for this year, and I know we came into this season as something of the underdog. I know what that's like, having the odds stacked against you,"

John thought of Kelly's painful, arduous recovery period after her augmentations. He remembered Reach when her lung had collapsed and she smiled and said she was okay. She definitely knew what that was like, out of any Spartan it was her.

"But you all have improved so much, I'm very proud of each of you. So go out there and lay it all out, don't regret anything, push yourselves." She reminded John of Chief Mendez on one of the few days he expressed how proud he was of the Spartans.

"Alright, Blevins, do what you do," she said a little stiffly. A lanky male who must've been the team captain counted off and the entire team yelled at the top of their lungs "Spartans!"

Kelly went to the first event she had students in while the others with events later continued to stretch and talk.

A few walked past John and Cortana and John could hear them talking excitedly.

"I can't believe we have a real Spartan as our coach."

A blonde female readjusted her ponytail. She looked like a sprinter to John. "We've gotta make her proud, Coach K is the greatest."

Cortana smiled. "Coach K, that's really cute," she laughed. A few of the athletes snuck a few glances at John and Cortana, clearly a little confused at their presence.

As the meet progressed, John was surprised to see how...involved Kelly was with each of her kids. She actually had a few really talented kids. She also screamed and yelled a lot more than either John or Cortana would've expected.

"I have never seen her so fired up, and I've seen this woman slice an Elite in two after bashing in the skull of a Brute with her hands." John murmured.

As if on cue, they heard Kelly screaming "Push it, finish hard!" To

the anchor of her 400 meter relay team.

Fred sat down next to them, taking a break from photos.

"It is a little surprising but like all of us she is very competitive," Fred lowered his voice, "She thinks that some other schools resent the fact that there is a Spartan coaching this team and that officials sometimes make calls that aren't the fairest. But it's good, we may be among the first Spartans to retire but there is an entire branch of the UNSC that is Spartan-there will be hundreds retiring or getting out of the UNSC within the next decade or so. Society will have to adapt."

"That's interesting. There aren't many UNSC personnel on this planet, are there?" questioned Cortana.

Fred shook his head. "No, I think that's why we were placed here. It's quiet and not too extraordinary. Even if we wanted to we'd have a hard time causing trouble."

"It's the perfect place for us," spoke John.

"Didn't you grow up on Eridanus II?" questioned Fred.

"I was born there, yes," replied John.

"It must've been similar to this planet. They have started terra-forming the outer colonies that were glassed," stated Fred a little oddly.

"I wouldn't remember. I have fleeting memories before the Spartan program," said John.

"Me too. What do you remember?" asked Fred tentatively.

Cortana looked at John and he closed his eyes, wracking his brain.

"I remember sitting on a beach and my mother calling my name to come inside. I don't remember her face. I remember meeting Halsey. Sheâ€¦" He paused, trying to remember clearly. "She came to my school and watched me play gravball. She had a quarter and asked me to predict the coin flip. I guessed correctly and she gave me the quarter. A month later I was conscripted."

"You have a better memory than myself. I know Halsey didn't visit me herself. Kelly has the best memory, she vaguely remembers her parents. She was conscripted on her birthday, thought it was a game and evaded ONI for almost six hours," Fred said calmly.

John smiled. "That sounds like her,"

Cortana wanted to laugh but she couldn't help but feel saddened at the idea, an innocent little girl running from adults who wanted to abduct her. She tried to cover up her discomfort with humor. "I bet you guys were all the naughtiest kids in your classes, gave your parents a run for it,"

"I've always had to be the best," replied John.

"I bet you were bossy," teased Cortana.

The meet continued and Kelly's team appeared to be doing well. Cortana and John talked and watched, Cortana laughed at various comments John made throughout the event. Kelly ran around watching her students pole-vault, high jump, long jump and sprint their way to a third place overall with a few students advancing to the system-wide competition on Euripide.

Kelly gathered the students around and smiled. The kids started chanting something. Kelly blushed and covered her face with her hand bashfully.

Fred started laughing softly.

"What's going on?" questioned Cortana bemusedly.

"She promised the kids she'd run the track if they had 8 athletes advance and they had 10," smirked Fred.

"John, come over here!" Kelly yelled. John glared at her but listened to her all the same. Cortana saw the kids stare up at the tall man. A few parents had gathered around to congratulate their children and they too stared at John and Kelly.

"This is my brother John," she introduced. John felt very awkward about the 80-some sets of eyes looking toward him. He hadn't had this much attention in a while.

"If you can convince him to race me, I'll take a lap, hurdles and all," she goaded. John frowned.

The kids were silent for a split second but quickly got over their intimidation. "Race, race, race!" They started chanting loudly.

Cortana was busting a gut watching John under the scrutiny of a bunch of high schoolers, tears were streaming down her face.

John crossed his arms uncomfortably.

"It's okay if you think you're going to lose," Kelly goaded.

"I know I'll lose," he grumbled. There was almost no point, no one could catch Kelly.

"I'm old and injured," she said almost theatrically.

"We're the same age and I tore my Achilles tendon outrunning a Havoc missile once," he replied sarcastically, sounding almost like Cortana with his inflection.

"Loser buys drinks," Kelly wagered.

Looking at the kids and having Kelly play to his competitive nature, he sighed.

"Fine," Kelly looked like she was going to jump up and down in excitement. Even John had to admit, the idea of such a physical challenge with the fastest Spartan to ever have lived made him feel a

huge rush of adrenaline.

The kids lined up alongside the track with some of their parents. Cortana and Fred went near the starting line, Fred snapping some photos.

"Cortana, rules," prompted John.

She felt like they were on a campaign together, her assessing the situation, him awaiting her advice. Cortana clapped and starting blocks came out of the ground.

"Okay, one lap, all out. Fred calls the winner," Fred nodded. "Loser buys drinks at dinner," Cortana cleared her throat.

"On your mark," Kelly and John looked at each other and Cortana could see the Spartans start to assess the challenge.

"Get set," they both snapped down to the starting blocks in sync, bodies rigid. Cortana swore she could hear the starting blocks strain in the slightest at the pressure they were exerting.

"Go!" Cortana yelled.

They both exploded forward. Both sets of starting blocks broke.

The kids immediately burst into cheers, shouting for their beloved Coach K. Kelly was beating John by a visible margin at this point. Cortana was absolutely floored by how fast she was, it was nothing short of stunning.

Right when Cortana thought John was gonna get his ass kicked by the female Spartan they hit the straight away with the hurdles...John started to clear them three at a time whereas Kelly could only make two at a time.

"Holy shit!" she heard one of the kids yell.

Cortana couldn't take the excitement as John came around the last corner, Kelly catching up to him quickly. He and Kelly were both red, clearly pushing themselves as hard as they possibly could. Her veins bulged out of her neck and her hair trailed behind her, her arms pumped impossibly fast at her sides. They both moved with an animalistic fury tempered by the grace and fluidity in their movements. John's strides were longer but Kelly's were just so fast. It was going to be close.

Before she could stop herself, she yelled, but what she yelled surprised her:

"Chief!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, her fist clenched in the air.

When they finished she couldn't tell who'd won and everyone looked to Fred. He looked extremely embarrassed by the attention.

John caught his breath and swore. Cortana started laughing, knowing that he knew the result. Kelly had her hands on her knees as she caught her breath.

Fred finally spoke up, "Kelly won by .2 milliseconds."

The students erupted into cheers for their Coach. As she was with everything, Kelly was a graceful winner. She put her hand on John's shoulder and ran two fingers over his mouth, a Spartan smile. He did the same to her. Fred snapped a picture. Cortana felt tears prick at her eyes.

"Don't worry John, I'm a lightweight, can't drink too much, never picked that skill up in my time with the IVs," she teased.

"I'm not worried, I started saving for retirement at six," he joked. Fred laughed at this.

"Okay, we will be meeting at Marley's downtown for our end of the season banquet, everything should be arranged," smiled Kelly, speaking to her team.

John couldn't help but wonder what the evening was going to hold. It would most assuredly be interesting.

4. Chapter 4

THREE REVIEWS YAAAY! I will TAKE it! hahaha, made my day so more chapters yay.

This is meant to really show the Spartan's attempt at normalcy-hopefully it doesn't seem absurdly out of character. I try to really display that Kelly is trying, trying to do this whole civilian thing right because she wants to take the life she has for what it is. I know it seems like there is a lot of sex but I wrote a lot of this story in advance and that's just how the chapters are breaking down. hehehehe, I guess I just wanted to contribute to that part of the fandom! Hope it's not too farfetched, I really do care purely about character development and I think sex is kind of integral to the whole human experience. John's character has quite the journey to go on...

* * *

><p>Cortana walked up to John and grabbed his arm, leaning against him as they walked to their vehicle.<p>

"Admit it, that was fun," teased Cortana. John smiled a little. It was true, he felt alive, the thrill of competition still gave him a rush.

"A bit too much excitement for an old man like me," he deflected. Cortana rolled her eyes.

"I suppose you are what some would call a cradle robber, after all, I am only sixteen," even he rolled his eyes at this.

The drive to the restaurant wasn't long. It looked nice and it seemed like plenty of people had already arrived. The hostess stared for a long second at John, Cortana had to repeat that they were there for the track banquet. She shook her head and led them to a large room where everyone sat at tables. Kelly gestured that they come over and sit next to her at the table in front of the room. That table was

full of the graduating senior class, herself and Fred.

The food was buffet style and it was very good, everyone ate and drank. Many parents came up to Kelly to thank her for a job well done. Kelly smiled softly and gently shook the hands of many of them.

"At the end of the meet, that was amazing," commented one of the parents looking at Kelly and John.

"My brother is very competitive, I always beat him," Kelly boasted. Cortana laughed when John scowled subtly.

"Are you new to the system? We haven't seen you at any other meets," asked a blonde, curious parents. John stiffened a little bit.

"We're a little new, still settling in, we were so happy to be able to finally be able to make it and see Kelly in action," spoke Cortana.

Cortana took over talking to people about relatively mundane things-adjusting to a new system, etcetera.

"So you and your brother are quite obviously both Spartans," inquired a man with thick rimmed glasses. John didn't know what the story on this was so he just stared at Kelly. He always opted for silence if he wasn't one hundred percent confident in something he was going to say.

"Yes, he's my twin, we were sent to Reach when we were children and trained as Spartans together," she said with a surprising sense of finesse. She must have been briefed better on this better than he had. It was amazing how little she had to lie, amazing what civilians would accept.

"So how does that work, with your parents and all of that," asked another. This is what John was afraid of, all of these questions. Kelly paused for a second and John spoke.

"Our parents died when Eridanus-II was glassed," John stated. A half truth-it was more than likely true for him and would most likely stop any further questions.

John had never seen such open sadness expressed over a total stranger from a group of people.

"That must be so hard, you must really depend on each other," commented another.

"After the Fall of Reach, John and I were separated for years. I didn't know if he was dead or alive for a large part of my military career, it was very difficult. But here we are, old and retired," she smiled.

"You two can't be a day over thirty!" flattered a parent. Kelly flushed at the flattery. It must have been odd for Kelly. She was an extremely beautiful woman, Cortana observed. She must get a lot of attention even when she's not realizing it.

"So where did you meet each other?" this question was directed at

Cortana. John was amazed at how comfortable people were asking what he considered intensely personal questions of strangers.

"I was born on Reach," John had noticed whenever Reach was mentioned, everyone felt a need to look down and seem sad or solemn. John vaguely remembered a campaign centered around 'remembering Reach,' to boost support for the UNSC and anger towards the Covenant. It clearly had been very effective. He wondered if Cortana looked Hungarian at all, like most of the citizens of Reach had been.

"John and I served together my entire career-I was a field intelligence analyst assigned to John. I often worked the bridge during slipstream travel, lots of time to think. My parents died during the Fall of Reach," she spoke evenly, John couldn't tell she wasn't speaking from experience.

Before anyone could ask any more questions Kelly started a presentation that showed various photos from the whole season. They were rather excited, the students smiling at all the photos, cheering at some and laughing at funnier ones. There was a team photo from the beginning of the season. Everyone was smiling except Kelly. Kelly looked rather solemn, even a little more haunted than she did in the present.

The presentation ended and Kelly walked up to a podium to talk for a little bit. Cortana couldn't help but notice how graceful she was. She never hunched her shoulders down, she stood at her full height, not even the least bit ashamed of what she was and Cortana had to admire that. Kelly even had her sleeves rolled up so her bone graft scars were clearly visible. Somehow they didn't look ugly or scary, they looked like they were a part of her, white scars climbing up her long arms further emphasizing her strength, the power and muscle underneath. So often Cortana had felt shame for who and what she was.

"This has been a new experience for me. Not long ago, I could never have foreseen not only an end to a war I'd dedicated my entire life to, but working with your children. I thank you for your trust and I thank your children for their hard work. You may have heard from them that I am unrelenting and at times rather stern," a few kids laughed. "But being here and watching you all grow has helped me more than you could ever know," her voice had the tiniest quiver in it.

A female at the senior table stood and spoke to the room, "Before we get back to eating, us seniors have a gift for Coach K," all of the older students stood. Kelly looked shocked.

"So, when we found out we were getting a real Spartan for our track and field coach, we were absolutely terrified," the room laughed, some of the younger kids nodded. "And while we can't even dream of running as fast as you or throwing anything as far as you probably could, you never once stopped believing in us and never once expected anything less than excellence from us, I speak for the whole team when I say that none of us have ever felt so cared for, so supported, and so inspired."

All the students went down the line and said a favorite memory they had from the season. Some were funny and others more serious. Kelly looked as if she were hanging on their every word. The last senior stood up to speak. He was a lanky blonde with glasses, he was thin

but looked fast.

"I remember I was having a bad day at school, my brother, who was an ODS, came for a visit. He hasn't been the same since he was discharged because of an injury that causes him chronic pain," the boy paused, "and you asked me what was wrong, you could tell that something wasn't right even though I hadn't told anyone. Even just you asking made all the difference to me, I felt so much better knowing that someone knew I didn't feel right. That night at the meet I did what you said, I went all in and I broke my personal record for all of my events and got first in the 400. My brother came to the meet, it was his first time at a public event with his prosthetic. After the meet he told me he was proud of me and that you served alongside his battalion before the end of the Human-Covenant war. He said that you and another Spartan saved him and his whole battalion by running into Covenant fire as a diversion outnumbered by almost one hundred of them,"

The whole room was silent. Kelly recalled the mission-the ODSs had been brave, their losses had been critical that day, despite that they had fought on with valor.

The boy was close to tears at this point. "I guess all I can say is thank you for everything Coach." The room cheered loudly, The seniors presented Kelly with a photoboard that had pictures of all of them. It was signed with lengthy, heartfelt messages. They also presented a gift card to a clothing store that specialized in clothes she apparently wore often. John was impressed with how attentive her students were and how they clearly cared for her.

John observed as all the seniors swarmed Kelly in what could be described as nothing less than a group hug. At first, she seized up, uncomfortable but before she knew it she was hugging them back and crying herself.

In that moment, John knew that Cortana was right-Kelly was going to be an excellent mother. Even though he had never really known a mother, he knew that there was something to it that Kelly seemed to, somehow, instinctively possess.

Everyone was talking and laughing happily afterwards. John bought Kelly her promised drink of choice and looked upon the room. The children, really, young adults looked so innocent. At this age John had already seen war, he'd killed hundreds and sustained life threatening injuries. They all laughed and smiled, oblivious.

It was all worth it. He thought to himself. Seeing these students of outer colony planets like he himself was, he saw the safe world he had helped create for all of them. Their innocence brought him hope.

"They're wonderful, aren't they?" whispered Kelly.

He nodded. "I have absolutely no regrets."

Kelly sighed. "I look at them and I feel so grateful. So honored that I was given the responsibility of defending them, of fighting for them. I will never forget when you and I looked upon Jericho VII as it was glassed. You said that there would be other places to fight for and I didn't believe you. As usual, you were right, and here we

are. This place is worth everything to me. The loss of Reach inside of me has been healed. Not forgotten, but soothed,"

John nodded. "I understand." He looked over at Cortana who was laughing at a joke someone was telling. "Thank you for inviting us. Cortana does well with other people, I feel badly that she has isolated herself for me all of these years."

"She is special. Never lose her," said Kelly sternly. John thought back to Sergeant Johnson's dying words.

"It's funny, you aren't the first person to tell me that. Despite that, I've lost her twice before. She keeps coming back to me somehow," he sipped at his beer.

"Hold her closer then. It is in our nature to give until we have nothing more, a blank check written up to the value of our very lives and yet you've held back with her," He noticed her glance at her wedding band.

He shook his head. "I don't know if that's what she wants."

"That's a lie, you know her," Kelly stated calmly.

"Even if it is what she wants, it's too risky," he gripped his glass a little tighter than necessary, twisting it nervously.

"If it's ONI and the UNSC you're worried about, you should know they could care less. If you hadn't gone AWOL they would've found a way to retire you regardless, you just gave them an easy out. They want to forget we exist without seeming callus. It's shameful how little they've acknowledged everything you have done for humanity," she collected herself before she lost her temper. "What I'm trying to say is that you have been excessively cautious. So many others cannot enjoy this freedom that we've bled for, it's irreverent to do anything less than live your life to the fullest degree of possible happiness."

John looked at Cortana while she talked to a few of the parents while she sipped at a drink. Her cheeks were a little flushed, her blue eyes, the only thing on her that didn't really look human, they were much too bright and vibrant to occur naturally in humans, lit up her face as she told a story. He did love her more than he'd loved anything.

"Is that why you want to have a child?" he asked evenly.

Kelly took a large gulp of her drink. "Partially. I feel like Frederic would be a good father, he's patient and compassionate," she paused, "A selfish part of me sees how much I have grown from these children and I want to experience that with my own child, I know I have a lot of growing to do as a person. But mostly I just feel that it would help me move on, move on from the UNSC and the feelings of aimlessness Fred and I both have after forty years of service."

John nodded. It made sense to him, her rationale. Moving on was hard for him in some ways but in others it had been the most natural thing he'd ever done. He liked the life he and Cortana had and part of him was uncomfortable with how rapidly it was changing. He knew she was happier and usually her happiness was his happiness.

"I will think upon it," he said looking to Kelly. She smiled a tiny smile and put her hand on his shoulder. She promptly finished the rest of her drink.

"Time for another drink," she smiled.

"I thought you said you couldn't drink much."

"I might have been fibbing a little bit. Spartan-IVs have some pretty interesting drinking customs," she said, taking John's credit chip and tapping it on the counter they sat at to receive another cocktail.

"Like what?" John couldn't help but be a little curious, he'd only been on one Spartan-IV fireteam before he went AWOL and it had been very strange.

"Well, there's a tradition on fireteam Kronos that for every kill you make with an energy sword you have to take a shot, of course a shot purchased by your teammates," she trailed off. John knew that Kelly's preferred Covenant weapon was the plasma sword and for good reason, she was one of the few people quick enough to be truly deadly with it, at least on a large scale. The only person John knew who was better with it was Thel'Vadaam himself. "You may recall I'm not too shabby with an energy sword so, needless to say, I drank the most by far that evening," she chuckled at the memory. She had fallen down a few times walking back to her dorm with her teammates-it was the first time she had felt at ease with them, like she had belonged with them.

John chuckled imagining Kelly drinking a bunch of them under the table over a plasma sword. He couldn't help but fondly recall his days in the field with Blue Team. They were truly amazing.

"They of course all find other reasons to drink, for a while most of them revolved around me and how awkward I felt around them, the first week or so the team would tally up non-mission essential words I spoke to them and take a drink for each one. The first week they had three total," she wrapped her fingers on the counter. Her eyes were far away remembering a time he hadn't experienced.

"It was a different battle entirely, the Covenant separatists didn't have a fraction of the resources they needed to be truly effective so I actually had tours of duty instead of always being on duty. Fred was working mostly in command structure instead of in the field-occasionally he was a sniper for specific targets, you remember how he has those eyes," John did remember, Fred was one of the best snipers he'd ever seen, second only to Linda, "but most of the time he was needed in a supervisory capacity. We became closer when I served in the Spartan branch, it was how I started to look at him as something besides a brother," she smiled at the memory.

A few of her athletes came up to her and asked to take pictures with her and John stood alongside and watched. They all clearly adored her. She was a good leader, like all of the Spartans were but throughout her career she'd never really had a chance to show it. Some lingered and talked to her for a while. She spoke to them evenly and politely but with a certain amount of affection.

"How do I become a Spartan?" one of them asked, looking to both her and John. John looked at the girl, she was relatively short and didn't seem particularly strong, but there was an intensity about her, in her words.

"I think spots are extremely limited now that the war is over. I do not believe that people can enlist directly into the Spartan branch of the military, unless it's through a service academy so that is an option if you've considered applying. I would recommend to anyone who wishes to be a Spartan that you work on your PT and pursue the path of an ODST, they often do very well as Spartans. I am not the best person to give information because I am a Spartan class II, the process is very different right now. I could give you the contact information to some Spartan class IVs I served with and I am sure they would be happy to give you more information," she rambled a little not really knowing what to say.

The girl looked to John. "Do you have any advice?"

John wondered what she would think if she knew she was talking to the Master Chief and if that meant anything to kids in schools these days. He didn't have a very inflated sense of self, but he found the idea amusing.

"Evaluate why you want to be a Spartan. Being a Spartan isn't about running fast, jumping high and throwing things. It is about abandoning your very self and putting the mission first, no matter the cost," he looked into his half empty glass for a second, "Until a day ago, I hadn't seen Kelly for so many years I had lost track. I didn't know if she was dead or alive. I didn't even know she had married. That is the life of a Spartan," he took a gulp of his drink.

Kelly wrote down the contact info and the girl thanked her.

"Do you have any that would be good Spartans?" John couldn't help but ask.

Kelly hesitated, "I don't know, I don't know what they're looking for nowadays."

"Are there any like us?"

"...No," she answered resolutely. John nodded. He didn't think so either. Perhaps they had entered an era where Spartans like them were no longer needed.

The parents and students left and Fred joined them at the bar. Kelly really had been lying when she had said she was a lightweight, John was starting to feel a bit of a buzzing sensation just trying to keep up with her.

"I know it is a story, but I truly do feel like you are my brother," sighed Kelly.

"I am, it was me, you and Sam from the beginning," said John without hesitating.

"How much do you remember?" she asked.

"After we rang that bell it was all history."

He felt someone's hands run over his back and sit alongside him. Cortana leaned up against his side and smiled a toothy grin at him.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" she asked him, ordering herself a drink.

"Hm," he grunted. She laughed at this.

She enjoyed her drink leisurely and talked with Kelly and Fred, she and Kelly ended up doing most of the talking. John was surprised at how well they got along, he never knew how social she was, perhaps because he'd had her to himself for so long. He wouldn't describe how he felt as jealous, but it was unnerving for him to see her so normal, so human with someone besides him. It made him happy but it was still strange.

"Thank you so much for inviting us out Kelly, you were amazing," proclaimed Cortana. Kelly smiled a reserved smile, feeling proud of her work.

"I think we are going to get going," said John, standing up.

"I'll meet you outside John, I'll only be a minute," said Cortana as Fred got up.

Cortana took out her tablet, "Kelly, let me see your tab," Cortana said. Kelly pulled the device out of her pocket. Cortana pulled up some information and it projected above her's. She pulled it over and put it on Kelly's. "I did some research, messed with a few systems and got you and Fred an appointment tomorrow with a specialist,"

"I-everyone was booked for months when I checked after you left last night," Kelly sputtered.

Cortana smiled. "I'm not an AI anymore but there are still things a girl can do if she knows a few tricks," she winked.

"I can't...I don't even know what to say," sighed Kelly.

Cortana's smile faltered. "This is what you wanted, right? I didn't overstep any boundaries I hope..if I miscalculated I sincerely apologize and-"

"No, that's not it at all, this is wonderful it's just," Kelly sighed shakily, a smile appearing on her face, "I just can't believe it," she laughed nervously, "Thank you. So much."

Cortana put a hand on her shoulder. "You're welcome. Anything for John's sister," Cortana smiled mischievously. The two women got up and went outside.

John had started their vehicle and was standing outside, scrolling through an article on his tab as he leaned up against the car. Seeing him do something so mundane was oddly appealing to Cortana and reminded her of exactly how attractive she found him.

Kelly waved goodbye to John and moved to get in her vehicle with Fred before she stopped.

"Cortana," she called.

Cortana turned to look at her before she opened the door.

"Yeah?"

"Would youâ€¦" Kelly fidgeted a little. "Would you come over after," she searched for words, "what we talked about?" she finished quietly enough that Cortana had to strain to hear.

"Yes, of course, message me," replied Cortana as she got into the vehicle next to John, but not before she noticed Kelly smiling bashfully.

John started driving away. "What was that all about?"

"I'm making friends," she replied simply.

"Careful, I don't like to share," he teased dryly.

Cortana giggled. "Is someone jealous?"

He snorted and pulled up to their home. "Don't be silly,"

"You know I'm always silly," she responded quickly as she opened the front door.

"Not always," he shut the door and pulled her to him.

Cortana laughed and blushed at how forward he was being. She stood on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Unorthodox, then," she said lowly.

"I never said there was anything wrong with unorthodox," his hands lingered on her hips as he leaned down to kiss her. Cortana felt him lift her up and she gasped, slightly surprised. He broke away and started kissing down the column of her throat. She giggled as his stubble tickled her neck.

"John, what has gotten into you," she said a little breathier than she'd like to acknowledge.

"A few drinks and some advice," he murmured against her neck. She wrapped her legs around his waist and he made a strangled sound in the back of his throat.

He carried her to their room, she pulled his shirt over his head. He lost patience with the button down she was wearing, ripped it and then discarded it.

"I liked that shirt!" she exclaimed.

He all but tossed her on their bed and took off the pants he was wearing, leaving him in his briefs.

"I'm sure you'll forgive me," he teased as he leaned over her and

pulled her pants down, running his hands over her legs as he did so. She hummed at the sensation.

"I don't know about that, I'm difficult to persuade," she sighed.

"Is that a challenge?" he whispered as he unclasped her bra.

"Perhaps," she gasped as he ran his callused hand over her breast.

He spent the rest of the evening persuading her until they fell asleep.

5. Chapter 5

Very dialogue heavy chapter, but I hope it helps elaborate on Kelly's character. She's really my favorite to write because I have so much liberty with her, but I do think she could actually be this way based on the little I've read of her in the books.

* * *

><p>Her eyes widened. She hadn't expected him to react this way. She didn't necessarily expect him to fly off in a rage, he never did that, but she had expected something.<p>

"What do you want to do about this," she gestured to where the transmission had projected.

"There's nothing really to do is there?" he poured himself more coffee. She looked at him, she hadn't predicted his reaction.

"No," she sighed and looked into her mug, "I suppose there isn't."

"Look at it this way, if there is a problem, ONI will probably send a talking head to come and explain whatever story they want public on a news forum. From what Kelly has told me, as long as we aren't starting up some sort of insurrectionist movement with three Spartans and an ex-AI, they are happy and we're left alone," he drank more of his coffee, "After all, the most honest assessment made of me was when I was referred to as an 'aging Spartan,'" he stated dryly.

"What about me?" she said worriedly.

"Halsey made sure that on paper you had the required papers for citizenship and naturalization. They shouldn't be able to touch you."

"They also shouldn't have been able to touch a bunch of six year olds in their homes but they managed that," she cried, panic creeping into her voice.

"Nothing is going to happen to you," he said calmly.

"How can you say that?" she exclaimed.

"Because I'm here and I won't let anything happen to you," he spoke finally.

Cortana's eyes widened. How could he speak with such confidence, how could he even imply that if confronted with fighting for her against the will of the UNSC, he would.

She smiled softly. "Okay," she exhaled, looking down.

"It won't come to that, I think that they're pretty much done with us. The future doesn't need me, they have an entire branch of Spartans who will succeed in defending humanity."

"I hope so Chief."

"I'm retired," he droned.

"Old habits," she replied filling her cup of coffee again. She grabbed the pot to find it was almost empty. She laughed. "Gosh, we've gotten really bad about coffee, we drink a lot."

"Don't know how I survived two wars without it," he got up to go make another pot. Cortana couldn't help but laugh. She was happy that he wasn't upset.

They went their separate ways in the afternoon the way they usually did. Cortana continued to read and research things that interested her while John did whatever he did outside-Cortana usually didn't concern herself with it.

Around 1600 Cortana received a message from Kelly.

Can I come over? Cortana had never had anyone visit. Cortana sent the coordinates.

I'm going to run over.

Cortana set down her book.

Okay, just come in don't bother knocking.

Kelly arrived shortly thereafter. She of course didn't look winded at all, her hair was still perfectly in place, yet Cortana could tell she didn't seem quite right.

Cortana invited her into their living room and turned the fireplace on, she found it relaxing so maybe Kelly would too.

"Our house is pretty small," commented Cortana as Kelly sat down into their couch that was too large for the room.

"It's nice," said Kelly, looking around at the open rafters and wood floors.

Cortana felt proud of their little house. "John and I built it ourselves when we came here, I programmed all of the interfaces and programs that run the house and John did all the woodwork, it was pretty fun," Cortana smiled at the memory.

Kelly looked around at the small decorations they had, Cortana had hung up Fred's picture of John. There was a shelf that had John's medals built into the wall. Kelly could see the influence Cortana had on the home clearly, things were a little less orderly than her and Fred's house, a little more lived in-a mug set on a table, curtains flowing by an open window, a fingerprint on a mirror, it felt a little less sterile.

Cortana watched Kelly and she could tell that the woman wanted to speak but was too uncomfortable.

"So how did it go?" Cortana prompted.

Kelly put her a hand on her forehead and looked rather anguished. Cortana sighed.

"Look, I'm sure that disappointment in this kind of thing is normal, I could help you find someone else and-"

"It went fine," Kelly sighed.

Cortana waited for her to continue.

"They gave Fred and I a series of hormone shots and pills to take an hour before we want toâ€¦" she looked down. Cortana was shocked at how uncomfortable she was talking about anything of a sexual nature, but she supposed that would be normal.

"Have sex," Cortana finished for her and Kelly nodded.

"What are you afraid of?" Cortana asked rather clinically.

"I don't know."

"Well surely you know what to expect," questioned Cortana.

"In the most clinical sense, yes."

"So what you're saying is you don't know what to anticipate physically and emotionally," prodded Cortana.

Kelly looked confused. "I don't understand."

Cortana felt herself get a little warm. "Well there's a lot more to it than just, well...finishing," Cortana concluded awkwardly.

Kelly stared at her blankly and Cortana knew she wasn't going to like the conversation coming.

"I just...I don't know what to expect, both of us," pleaded Kelly. "Of course I understand the mechanics and what needs to happen to conceive a child but what if it still doesn't work right what if we do it wrong?"

Cortana understood a little better now, Kelly had put sex into a category of failure and success, success being conception of a child and failure being everything else.

"You know that sex is pleasurable, right?" Cortana had to ask because clearly Kelly wasn't seeing the entire picture.

Kelly nodded, "Yes but I don't understand why or how really,"

"So you've never had any...I don't know, erotic thoughts or fantasies?" she prodded. If that's where the conversation was going, it may as well be productive, Cortana mused.

"I think so, when I was a young girl before the augmentation procedures I would have..dreams," she trailed off.

"Okay well, do you remember how that made you feel?"

"Warm...confused, uncomfortable."

"You see that's the problem, you're associating your feelings that you have as something uncomfortable and confusing," Kelly looked slightly ashamed. "A war is not a place for sexual thoughts and feelings, this is true, but now you need to focus on allowing yourself to feel out what's right for you, I mean, you find him attractive don't you?" Cortana sighed.

"So you find John attractive?" questioned Kelly.

Cortana flushed as she started thinking about him in varying states of undress. "Um...Yes. Very much. Attractive that is, how I find him," she stuttered awkwardly.

"But what does that even mean? I feel that I could just as easily say that you are 'attractive' as I could say about Fred,"

Cortana held back a sigh. This is worse than she thought. If Kelly wasn't so set on being a mother she probably would've just told her to forget about it.

"I mean, assessing that someone is aesthetically pleasing to look at is different than finding them attractive," Cortana paused and sighed. "I'm going to have to go there I guess. "For example, there are certain features about John that I find particularly attractive, like his eyes or his hands, I like when he has a day or two of stubble and how that feels when he kisses me, I like his arms, all of those kind of things make me feel," she paused and couldn't help but feel embarrassed being so frank, "it makes me feel what would clinically be described as arousal but that's just too distant of a word for the actual feeling, it feels exciting and exhilarating,"

"Like going into battle," Kelly reasoned.

"Yes but different, same concept, heart beating in your ears," Cortana only spoke because she had been able to tell what John felt when he went into battle through their neural connection, "It's much more" Cortana struggled for words. "It's much more uncontrollable, it makes you act just...impulsive, say and do stupid things, you feel like you're on some sort of drug sometimes...I can tell you that you won't be disappointed," Cortana laughed a little awkwardly. "Have you ever thought about Fred that way?"

Kelly clearly was deep in thought. "Yes, I think so,"

"Okay so what was the situation, if you don't mind me asking," prodded Cortana.

Kelly looked right at Cortana. Cortana found that oftentimes Spartans made more eye contact when they were uncomfortable which was the opposite of her instinct. They made a lot of eye contact in general.

"There was this time where I had just come home from work and Fred was in the shower," Kelly paused and wrung her hands, "I went into our bedroom to put my coat and shoes away and to talk to him about his day, the water stopped and he came out from the bathroom into our room and.." she was starting to turn a little red, she was still very pale so a blush was quite easy to spot on her as it crept up her neck, "I've seen him naked before, that wasn't it, it was something aboutâ€¦" she closed her eyes as if she was trying to remember the exact moment, "Something about the way the towel was loose around his hips and there were still drops of water on his body and in his hair," she finished a little breathy.

Cortana was pretty amazed, she could tell that the other woman was highly uncomfortable with how she felt right now and shocked by her reaction, but it was different than being awkward, gosh what they put in that shot must sure work fast.

"So, how do you feel right now, remembering that memory?"

Cortana saw a visible shiver run up the other woman's spine, then Kelly looked at her in shock.

"Good. Very good. My heart is beating faster. I'm scared, butâ€¦" she took in a deep breath, "Good overall." she nodded firmly.

"You should think on that memory and see where it takes you, maybe you could tell him about it and maybe he has other memories like that about you, whatever you think would help both of you be on the same page," explained Cortana. Kelly nodded as if she was mentally taking notes.

"Can you tell me what it's like?" she spoke quietly after a minute.

Cortana looked downward bashfully. "You want to hear about me and John," Cortana questioned a little skeptically. She couldn't believe she was explaining sex to a forty-six year old virgin. "I mean, the first time wasâ€¦" Cortana closed her eyes in embarrassment hoping that maybe the whole situation would disappear if she could just melt into the chair she sat in. She opened her eyes and Kelly was still sitting there. Nope, that didn't work.

Kelly just continued to look at her with those big eyes and Cortana couldn't help but think she looked so young and naive in that moment. It was an odd picture. This Spartan had seen and done amazing things, things that most people couldn't even fathom but as a woman she had very few experiences.

"The first time was a little painful and slightly awkward, but it gets better exponentially with practice," she explained. "I mean...let me put it this way, overall, out of all the human experiences I've had, eating, swimming, feeling the sun on my skin,

taking a hot bath, sex is easily the most wonderful, amazing and pleasurable of anything I've ever done." Kelly continued to listen with rapt attention, clearly wanting to know more.

"It's like...It's like being on fire but in a good way, without it actually burning," Cortana looked at Kelly and knew that the metaphor was lost on her. "It's the biggest rush you could ever experience, but it is also a little scary," explained Cortana.

"What's scary about it," prompted Kelly.

"I mean, you're both naked and completely vulnerable to one another, you have to trust someone else with your body. I worried a lot about silly things like 'will he like how I look,' and 'what if I'm bad at it, or 'does he still want me after all this time,' which all really ends up meaning nothing. You have to trust yourself, to let yourself feel good. It's really easy, at least for me, to overanalyze things and misinterpret when really it's rather simple, it almost entirely comes down to trust which is, in my opinion, a large part of what love is," she knew she was rambling but she couldn't really stop.

Kelly nodded. A little tension released from her shoulders.

"Look, all that matters is you two figure it out together. It might be awkward or uncomfortable at first but as long as you both pursue what feels good and right, you can't really go wrong! It is just you two, together and that's all that matters," comforted Cortana.

Kelly smiled softly. "So there aren't any rules?"

"No not really, I mean, of course there are physical limitations but anything that feels good is fair game in my opinion! I mean, do you even know what you like?"

Kelly shook her head. Cortana sighed.

"How many of those pills did you two receive?"

"Thirty each and then weekly injections for a month, we were told we shouldn't need the pills after a month of the injections, then it's just boosters every six months."

"I recommend that you and Fred take it slow. You two should take your pills this evening but instead focus on showing each other what you like and figuring it out for yourself, and if sex happens as a result of that then so be it, if it doesn't, don't attach positives or negatives to any outcome, everything is a step forward."

Kelly was once again deep in thought. "You've helped me a lot, it's a lot to think about."

Cortana smiled. "It's not a problem, it's admirable that you're taking care of yourself and pursuing the things you want, that can be one of the hardest things for someone to do."

Kelly nodded.

"How did you know that you loved the Chi-," she caught herself, "I mean John," she amended awkwardly.

Cortana smiled warmly. "When I was created, Catherine told me I could pick any of the Spartans. I could've picked you or Fred even, all of you were strong, brave, fast...I initially picked John because he just had this...luck, this energy about him that drew me to him. He was so...magnetic. Right away there was something that drew me to him, I thought he was attractive, even in photos. Of course because of my nature, being created from a flash clone of Doctor Halsey's brain, I had to wonder how much of my feelings were her's and if I could even have feelings of my own," Cortana paused and sighed. It was a point of her existence that was very challenging, being separate from her. She very much wanted to be different from her.

"I knew that I loved him truly when I was tortured by the Gravemind. He was the only thing that kept me alive, the thought of him, his mind, how he felt like home to me, his promise and commitment to me helped me fight. It was the only thing I could remember, the only thing I could identify with enough to simultaneously keep the index safe and remain myself. I knew it wasn't just an eccentricity I'd inherited from Catherine, my feelings for him went above and beyond my primary objective programming. It was the only thing I knew was real, just from my own experience and without analyzing it. I could interpret every fact and rule of the universe but still never truly experience it as an AI, but loving John was the first and only thing I knew was real. I gave my life for him, I would do it over and over again. He makes me insane and yet he provides me with the only true clarity I've ever experienced."

Kelly stared at Cortana, silently for a few moments before she spoke. Cortana felt if she was truly analyzing her, trying to peer into her very being with those big Spartan eyes of her's.

"Out of everything I have experienced, every story I have ever been told, every trial I have endured and seen, that," she looked once again directly at Cortana, "was the most wonderful story I have ever heard."

Cortana blushed again. Hearing Kelly make such eloquent proclamations was strange for a Spartan. "He is an easy man to love."

"Most would disagree. The Spartan-II soldiers have been criticized as exhibiting sociopathic tendencies, lacking empathy, being simply machines," Kelly said bluntly. By the way she spoke, Cortana couldn't decide if Kelly agreed or disagreed with what she said.

Cortana shook her head. "No. I lived life labeled merely as a machine, feeling constantly that I was more. I feel that John struggled with this too-even though he was born a human, soldiers often viewed him as a robot, a machine, not flesh and blood. He started to view himself this way but I knew better. I knew that inside, underneath all of that armor he was just a man. A man capable of saving the universe, but a man all the same. I know him and he knows me, he is the best I have seen of humanity, he is the most caring, devoted, feeling person I have ever met. The rest of humanity is what is cruel, what is flawed. John is not a man of words, he is a man of action. When he makes a promise he keeps it. He is stubborn, obstinate, reckless and just as flawed as any of us, but his true nature, what truly defines him, is good. He is the most purely good being I have ever met. With so much evil in this world, goodness is what I treasure the most,"

Cortana paused, looked at Kelly and grabbed her hand. Kelly looked up, surprised at the contact. "I see the same goodness within you, the same goodness within you and Fred, you should trust that, trust that there is goodness within you and that the goodness that has made you a great soldier is going to make you a great partner to Fred and a great mother."

A great deal of emotions passed through Kelly, disbelief being the first. She'd never thought of herself as a romantic partner to someone, let alone a mother. At times, she felt that these past six months had been a fantasy-she'd lost sight of who she really was: a soldier, a machine. Before her eyes she'd created a world where she was something else, a divine fantasy where she was a track coach, a teacher, a wife, a mother. She saw a fantasy to which she thought her reality could be, two separate people, Spartan Kelly-087 and then just Kelly. They were parallel lives that would never cross each other.

Hearing Cortana speak of this goodness was foreign to her. As a Spartan she had been defined as the fastest. She was strong, she was brave and she was intelligent. She had never been described as something so delightfully simple and at the same time something so abstract as good. Cortana could see it so plainly, she could separate the soldier and the woman, something she had never really been able to do. She saw her for what she wanted to be but couldn't see for herself. She looked down at the comparatively tiny hand that grasped her own.

"For you to describe me as something so simple yet so great is complicated for me. Being a civilian is hard for me. I see how John has adapted with you and it initially made me feel that there must surely be something wrong with me specifically. Even Fred shows such promise in his work, such dedication and I tried to match it with mine. I've loved every minute of the work I do, children show such devotion when given the chance," she smiled briefly as she thought of her students but sighed.

"And yet, I've felt hollow. The way I've viewed myself has been wrong, you are right, there is more to me than being fast and strong, than being a Spartan," she paused, then smiled. "I don't know everything about myself or really who I am, but I think I can start with good and see what happens."

Cortana smiled, "That's what we're all doing anyways, trying to learn about ourselves and the world around us, you're no different in that regard."

Kelly sat back in her chair and let go of Cortana's hand. She crossed her legs and looked at the woman across from her. It was difficult to imagine that she hadn't always had a body. She sat so naturally, she dressed very well, her facial expressions were very animated, very reflective of her feelings. Kelly didn't think about aesthetic appearances very often but she knew that Cortana was very beautiful. She could see the resemblance to Dr. Halsey, but there was something slightly more exotic to her. She kept her hair short and layered. Her eyes were a very striking blue, they were dark and had a violet hue to them. Though Kelly didn't pay attention to these things, she knew she'd never seen another human with eyes that color. Her hair, though Black, was the same way, in the sunlight she could see a slight

indigo tint to it. It reminded her of when she was a little girl and had asked to color her hair blue for her birthday-her mother had begrudgingly said yes.

"Cortana?" Kelly got her attention.

"Hmm?"

"If I had to describe you in a word," she paused and looked to her, "It would be kind."

Cortana smiled warmly. "That means a lot, coming from you." Kelly blushed slightly, she could tell how much Cortana respected her, her flattery was slightly unnerving.

They continued to chat for a while until the sun started to turn the sky pink.

"I'm going to head out before it gets dark. Tell John I want to go running with him tomorrow, I have the day off."

"Ooh, he'll like that. He's been wanting to climb the mountain for a while, you guys should do that, last time he did I was with him and he ended up carrying me up the majority of it," Cortana stood to see her to the door.

Kelly was about to leave when Cortana spoke.

"Kelly, remember, you can talk to me and even John about anything. Same for Fred, even though he doesn't seem to be much of a talker."

"He isn't, he expresses himself best through his artistic pursuits. But thank you, it means a lot to me."

Cortana watched as she started running towards her home.

"Damn, I'm never going to get over how amazing that looks," Cortana couldn't help but marvel at how fast Kelly was, how amazing the Spartan capabilities really were. Seeing them perform such insane physical feats outside of the MJOLNER armor seemed paradoxical, that it just couldn't be real. She was an amazing woman and becoming an important friend. She felt grateful to have her in her life already.

6. Chapter 6

Now this chapter is pretty fluffy in the way that there is a lot of romance happening, but I hope that it's clearly not just gratuitous fan service-it serves a purpose in the development of both John and Cortana's characters. That being said, enjoy, haha! Thank you everyone who's reviewed, it gives me such encouragement!

* * *

><p>Cortana went back inside and started preparing food for dinner. John walked up behind her and put his hand on the small of her back. She smiled and leaned back into him, enjoying his warmth.<p>

"How is Kelly, I overheard some of your conversation."

"Of course you did," said Cortana, rolling her eyes. "Can't have any girl-talk in this house with those ears of yours," she jokingly took her index finger and flicked at his ear. "Which part of our conversation did you eavesdrop on?"

"I overheard her talking about the appointment you'd scheduled and left when you started talking about my stubble," he intentionally rubbed his scratchy cheek against her smooth one and she giggled.

"Hmm, stayed until I stroked your ego, I see how it is," she teased.

"How is she," he persisted.

"She's going to be okay, I think she's just having a difficult time sorting out her feelings because she never really has had to do that before," Cortana continued seriously.

"I'm glad she can talk to you."

"Well it's the least I can do," sighed Cortana, bringing their dinner plates to their table.

"You're easy to talk to."

"That's coming from you, keep in mind I lived in your head for years,"

"You like talking to people," he stated-it wasn't a question but an observation.

Cortana picked at her food. "Well yeah, I do, I think people are interesting."

He looked down. "I'm sorry that I've kept you here, without people and without contact besides myself."

Cortana felt confused, "John I-"

"I know that we've been happy here, that we've created a nice life for ourselves, but I feel that you have sacrificed so much for me, I have received so much from you, including your own life. I want you to be happy."

She felt shocked at his declaration. She didn't know how he could be uncertain of her happiness.

"John, I could've never imagined this life. I have been so indescribably happy. Anywhere that our path leads is fine with me. I mean that." She was shocked that he could possibly think she was anything but elated at the life they led.

"I justâ€¦" he paused and sighed, "I can never repay what you have done for me."

Cortana set down her fork. "Is that what this is about? Paying debts?" she asked softly. He didn't speak.

"John, you don't owe me anything. This is like what happened after Requiem," he tensed up at the memory. She was gone, out of his reach, out of his control, he was alone.

"You said that you were supposed to take care of me. We're suppose to take care of each other. And we always have," she got up, walked over to him and sat on his lap. She felt him wrap an arm around her and she cupped his chin, turning his head so he was looking at her.

"Listen to what I am about to say," she said, looking into his eyes.

He felt paralyzed by her intensity at times, her emotions had always been so plain and volatile, so honest. "I love you, you can stop carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders, we are, and always have been, a team. Anything I do and have ever done for you has been because I love you. You've taken care of me, you've protected me and given me more hope than you could even know," she leaned in and kissed him softly.

She pulled away and pressed her nose to his and looked into his eyes. "There is nothing I want more than to continue living life with you. Everything else is just a detail." she whispered.

He thought for a long moment about what she had said. All of those years they had spent together, John had never thought this would be the result. His own death was not something he had thought upon often, but if he had been asked, he never would've said 'I'll die an old man,' he probably would've said something like 'I am prepared to do anything to serve humanity, no matter the cost.' The only constant was Cortana. Cortana was with him. He depended on her. She was still here.

"Okay," he murmured. He ran his thumb over her cheek, still marveling at the softness of her skin. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation. She exhaled shakily as he ran his thumb over her lips.

"I like your lips," he spoke lowly.

"Hmm?" she questioned, her eyes still closed.

He leaned forward to her ear, his breath warm on her neck made her shiver. "Earlier today, you talked about the things you liked about me to Kelly. I like your lips." He ran his fingers over her cheek again. "I like your freckles," he pulled her closer to him and she pressed herself against him. He ran his hand down to her shoulder, across her decolletage and to her breast. "I like how soft you are."

"Mmmhmm," she couldn't help but sigh, she really liked it when he was so forward, it wasn't necessarily unusual, he was a physical person, but normally there was a bit more build up.

"I talked to Kelly about a few other things I like too," she spoke so closely to his mouth that her lips brushed up against his as she spoke. She was rewarded with a small shiver up his spine.

"What do you like?"

"I'd rather show than tell," she replied, her voice husky with desire.

Even though it was rather uncharacteristic of him he left their dishes on the table and carried her to their room. He had never felt the way she made him feel. He felt like he could forget so many things with her. She was so small, tiny hands, tiny feet, slim arms, everything about him dwarfed her.

He felt her press herself into him and he groaned; she was so soft, he could lose himself touching her. Initially he was confused by the feelings he had for her. He'd never experienced anything so torrential, so instinctive. He had feelings for her for a long time, but to have his feelings tied to a physical body had been an entirely different experience.

He kissed her jawline and she gasped in a way that provoked something deep inside of him, every sound she made drove him to a very specific point of madness.

"I like it when you do that," she sighed, she wrapped her arms around him and pressed her fingertips into his back. She ran her hands down to the bottom of his shirt and quickly pulled it over his head. She looked up at him, unabashedly staring at his body. She pressed her palms against his chest and with strength that surprised him she moved on top of him.

Her legs were on either side of his hips and it was painfully obvious what she was thinking about with how she pressed her hips into his. She crossed her arms and pulled her shirt over her head. He noticed she was wearing an undergarment she liked, it was dainty and purple with lace. He didn't really understand the appeal, it just stood in the way of what he really was concerned with.

He sat up to kiss her while she continued to move against him. He felt their movements become more frantic, more desperate. He pulled her bra's magnetic clasp apart and all but ripped it from her shoulders. He put one hand on her breast and another he fisted in her hair. She moaned into his mouth and dug her fingernails into his shoulders, down his back and to his pants. She quickly tore at the rest of his clothes making him feel rather exposed in comparison. Her bra had been something that he didn't really enjoy but for some reason he could appreciate her sheer panties. They were flimsy and left almost nothing to the imagination.

He grabbed her hip. Every time he found himself entranced by her soft, giving body. Everything about her invited him to touch, everything about her was opposite him, where he was all hard angles and corded muscle she was smooth curves and soft flesh. He hooked a finger on her underwear and pulled them down her legs, leaving her naked.

She was impossibly warm. That was always what struck him when he was with her, how she could embrace him so entirely, how she could send his body into a frenzy with her touch. He put his hand on the small of her back and pressed himself deeper into her and she groaned, her eyes shutting tight with what he recognized as pleasure.

She had a mole underneath her left breast and a constellation of

freckles near her right hip. Her skin was pale and her dark hair created striking contrast. He loved the little things about her form, even things she would probably consider flaws. He could feel tension building within him, it was primal and visceral. Initially he had found the sensation uncomfortable, until he had learned to fully abandon himself to the feeling.

Her breaths were becoming more shallow and her movements more erratic and frenzied. She pulled him to her, he could feel the sweat on her body. She pressed her forehead to his, her mouth open and her eyes dazed but intense as she looked into his.

She frantically called his name and he felt her body seize up. She clawed at his back desperately, saying his name again. He couldn't begin to describe how intensely the image of her pleasure affected him, her lips parted, moaning his name, her hair messed and sweat collecting on her brow, it was all too much for him. He moaned his release quickly. He felt his heart beating in his head. She kissed him passionately, her hands gripping the sides of his face, mouth open and wanting. She broke away from him, panting.

She sighed and rolled off of him, landing on her back with a light thump. She ran a hand through her hair, trying to catch her breath.

He fell back on the bed with a louder thud, both of them staring through the skylight, listening to the other breathe.

It had never really been like that, it was somehow different than normal.

They enjoyed a few minutes of silence. John loved the feeling of his blood pumping in his veins, his heart beating quickly and his mind slightly foggy.

"Kelly asked me what it was like, being with someone," Cortana spoke quietly.

"What did you tell her?" John responded after a beat of silence.

"That it was like being on fire without the pain," she said quietly. "Does that make sense to you?"

He thought about it, what it was like seeing her in the throes of passion, how it felt to find his pleasure within her, how it burst through his entire body and overwhelmed him completely. It seemed like such a flowery concept, something that couldn't really live up to all of the poetic declarations and metaphors that people proclaimed yet John felt there was no other way to describe it. It wasn't just something nice or good, it was beyond that entirely.

"Yes," he answered quietly and definitively.

"She didn't understand, but I can't say I blame her. It sounds rather silly if you haven't experienced it."

"Mm," he agreed. He understood why Kelly would perhaps find the metaphor confusing.

She got up and he couldn't help but admire her. She slipped on what he knew to be her favorite nightgown. She went into their bathroom to wash up. He reluctantly got up and put on a pair of sleeping pants and laid back down. He felt his eyelids start to droop with fatigue. He heard her hum a tune while she brushed her teeth, it was a habit he found highly amusing.

She uttered a quiet command and the lights in their room turned off leaving the room illuminated by moonlight. If there was one thing John loved about this planet it was the two moons it possessed. He found moonlight beyond soothing, it was why he put skylights in their bedroom.

She crawled into bed with him and wrapped herself around him, her head resting on his chest.

Right as he was about to sleep, he heard her speak.

"John?" she whispered.

"Hmm?"

She hesitated before she spoke again, her voice so quiet even he had to strain to hear.

"Let's do this forever."

Forever. It was a difficult concept for him to even comprehend. It was infinity, it was a promise and a declaration all in one.

"Yes," he agreed simply. He pressed a kiss to her forehead and fell asleep.

7. Chapter 7

Thank you for all the reviews everyone! Long chapter, see my note at the end.

* * *

><p>Months had passed since they had quietly agreed on 'Forever.' John's conversation with Kelly had continued to bother him regardless. If they had already decided on "forever" what was the point of a marriage, a relatively finite institution.<p>

The despite that rationale he couldn't shake the idea. He had watched how Cortana had taken to human, civilian life for over a year. It was as if she was meant to be this way all along. She took such joy from simple things-he'd come home and see her staring into the flames of their fireplace, taking a hot bath, listening to music, she'd even ordered herself a violin and started taking lessons. He knew deep down that she would enjoy the idea of marriage and a wedding, even for the sake of simply having the experience.

It still left him feeling torn. He had no idea the steps one took when asking someone to marry them. Fred and Kelly had married largely out of necessity, there had been no grandiose 'proposal'.

But he and Cortana wouldn't marry out of necessity. He would ask her purely because he thought it might be an experience she would want. He had already committed himself to her in every way he possibly could, almost any other gesture he could think of would come up short.

He ran alongside a river at what he considered to be a moderate pace, thoughts like this buzzing in his head the whole morning.

Cortana woke up that morning feeling awful. She'd never been sick before and wondered if she was coming down with something. She rolled out of bed and checked her tablet, she was shocked to see she had three messages from Kelly.

Can I come over?

You must be asleep.

I'm going to run over, I'll wait until you wake up.

God, it must be important if she felt the need to run over on a Saturday morning.

Cortana stood up and felt lightheaded. She put on her slippers and a robe and went out to the living room to see Kelly sitting on the couch, reading a book.

"Cortana, I-" she stopped mid-sentence when she got a look at her, her expression shifting to one of concern.

"Do I look that terribly?" questioned Cortana, slightly worried.

"You look paler than normal, where is John?" questioned Kelly.

"He's out running, it's fine, I just feel a little nauseated, what's gotten into you this morning?"

The largest smile Cortana had ever seen took over Kelly's face. Kelly excitedly patted the area on the couch next to her, indicating she sit down.

Kelly's mannerisms had gotten more and more casual the longer she was on her hormone replacement shots and the longer she taught at a primary school. Cortana couldn't help but wonder if she had just really needed to get laid, no matter how crude that was.

Cortana sat down by the excited woman. Kelly bit her bottom lip.

"I think I might be pregnant," she said, her eyes wide with excitement.

Cortana's eyes widened. "Really, why? Have you been showing any early pregnancy symptoms?" she questioned excitedly.

"No, I haven't been nauseated or dizzy, but I'm late, which happens every now and then but I think it's different this time, I have a feeling," Kelly spoke quickly and excitedly.

"Have you taken a test?"

"No...I brought a few over here, I was hopingâ€¦" she trailed off.

Cortana smiled. She knew this was a big moment for her, regardless of the outcome. She felt flattered that this woman considered her a friend, someone she could trust with her hopes and dreams.

"Do you want to take it now?"

Kelly nodded quickly. She took out the tiny pods used to detect pregnancy. Kelly took the pod and placed it on her forearm, pressed a button and it pricked her skin, taking a tiny blood sample.

"Okay, one minute," she stared at the tiny chip as it tested her blood for hormones that would indicate early pregnancy. Kelly stared intently at her forearm.

They were silent for the full minute. There was a clicking noise and an automated voice spoke:

"Elevated human chorionic gonadotropin levels detected, test result: positive."

Kelly brought her hands to her mouth, her eyes were wide and Cortana could already see tears forming.

"Oh my God," she whispered. She started laughing and a tear trickled down her cheek. Cortana started laughing with her.

"This is ridiculous," she wiped at her eyes while she laughed, unable to contain her joy.

"Probably the hormones," joked Cortana.

She looked at Kelly, she was positively radiant with happiness. It was a wonderful moment.

It didn't last long. Cortana suddenly felt overwhelmed by a bout of nausea and sprinted to the bathroom.

She heard Kelly call her name and follow her quickly enough to see her wretch into the toilet.

The other woman quickly kneeled down by her and pulled her hair back with one hand and rubbed her back as she continued to wretch and cough.

"Holy shit," Cortana gasped, trying to stop shaking and puking. She sat up and wiped at her mouth, enjoying the cold feeling of the bathroom tile.

She composed herself and sighed. "I am so sorry,"

Kelly shook her head and helped the smaller woman up. "No, it's fine, don't apologize."

"I don't know what's wrong with me," worried Cortana as they made their way back to the living room. Kelly went into the kitchen and got her a glass of water and sat back down by Cortana as she rubbed

her temples.

"How long have you been feeling like this?" questioned Kelly.

"About a week," groaned Cortana.

Kelly's eyes narrowed. She didn't speak and Cortana worried.

"What is it?" she questioned nervously.

Kelly sighed. "It's just," she paused awkwardly.

"Just what," prodded Cortana, starting to lose her temper a little bit.

"Have you perhaps considered that you might be pregnant?"

Cortana swore her heart stopped for a second in her chest.

She started laughing. Kelly looked at her oddly.

"That's impossible," Cortana continued to laugh hysterically.

"Why?" questioned Kelly.

"Because," she shook her head and ran a hand through her hair. "Because I'm not real, I'm not normal, it doesn't make sense," she shook her head more.

Kelly felt badly. After all the time and advice Cortana had given her, she never would've guessed that the other woman viewed herself as not real. It was saddening. Kelly considered her to be one of the closest friends she had ever had.

Kelly sighed, not really knowing the words to say. Instead, she reached into her pocket and pulled out one of other tests she had brought. Cortana's eyes widened and she started shaking. Kelly gently grabbed her arm and put the chip on her forearm, seeing that Cortana was clearly incapable of performing the simple action. Cortana didn't react at all to the slight prick that gathered a blood sample.

Kelly could hear Cortana's heart beat loudly in the silence of the room.

"Elevated human chorionic gonadotropin levels detected-"

Cortana screeched and threw the test across the room before it could finish.

"Cortana it's-"

Cortana promptly puked on Kelly's feet.

Kelly got up quickly and got some towels to clean up the mess. Cortana sat on the couch, shaking, staring at nothing.

Kelly looked in their pantry and grabbed a few crackers, she had read that they helped with nausea in early pregnancy.

She wiped up the mess and sat down by her friend who looked like she

was in shock.

"Cortana," she said worriedly.

"I have no idea how I could've missed this, it's laughable. I'm supposed to be a genius, I've missed my period for two months and it didn't even register to me that this was a possibility. That sounds stupid because I happen to enjoy very much how babies come into being but it just never seemed like...never felt like this could happen. But if I recall correctly, the UNSC birth control shots they administer should have worked their way out of John's system and I don't know if they would even work correctly on Spartans, it's never really been tested for obvious reasons. We just...we didn't even think," she shook her head, astounded at their oversight. It was like John to be reckless, to dive into a situation without considering every possible outcome but it was something she never did. It scared her.

"It's going to be okay," comforted Kelly.

Cortana looked down and shook her head. "I have no idea what I'm going to tell John," she whispered.

"Presumably the truth," stated Kelly bluntly.

"He's going to freak."

Kelly narrowed her eyes. "Are you actually saying this right now? I don't know if he even has the ability to 'freak.'"

"He can, I've seen it. When things don't line up with what he envisions he can lose it."

"What scenario have you witnessed," prodded Kelly.

"When I died he-"

"Cortana, listen to yourself. When you died he proceed to 'freak.' Of course he did, he loves you, that makes sense. He also 'freaked' when Sam died, just like I did. This is different, sure, it's an...adjustment," Kelly paused, observing her friend's reactions, she was still clearly panicking.

"But it'll all be okay, remember when you told me about how John is good?"

Cortana nodded. "He is," she said quietly.

"This is true, I've known him practically all my life. You are right in your assessment, he is good. And good people don't abandon or hurt the people they love. He might be shocked initially and even afraid, but that's never stopped him before, it won't stop him now."

Cortana nodded. "I've never kept a secret from him, not really. He's always known everything. Even right now I feel like I'm hiding something from him and I haven't even seen him. Not to mention I can't even see myself as a mother and-" she panicked again, "I'm going to get so huge!" she groaned.

Kelly sighed. "At least you're not close to seven feet tall, if I'm

intimidating now I'm going to be downright terrifying, or maybe just silly looking," she joked. Cortana started laughing despite the tears sliding down her cheeks.

"Can we go shopping for clothes together?" She had no idea why such a petty thought had come to mind but things weren't really making sense at the moment.

"We can shop for everything together, if you'd like," Kelly encouraged.

"A baby, a real baby, one part me another part John," Cortana sighed and for the first time really thought about it.

"All soft and tiny and cute," Kelly smiled, reflecting on her own joy.

Cortana sipped water and ate some of the crackers Kelly had brought and they continued to chat for a little bit, Cortana took two more tests, both of which were positive. Somehow her disbelief grew each time. It was surreal.

"I'm going to go home and tell Fred, if you're okay," Cortana nodded quickly.

"Go! Don't let me hold you back, go be happy!" She forced a smile. Kelly flushed and put on her shoes quicker than she'd ever seen her do, clearly no longer taking effort to move at a normal human speed, Cortana found it dizzying to watch.

John walked in the front door as Kelly was about to leave.

"Oh, hi John, I gotta run, Fred wants to run up the mountain again tomorrow, join us?" Before he could even answer she appeared to be sprinting home.

John watched her run off, visibly perplexed.

"What's wrong with her?"

Cortana laughed nervously. Something was wrong with her too. The world was going to hell the day he decided to buy an engagement ring.

His trip into town had been awkward. He had went into the jeweler and was astounded at how many choices there were. Everything he saw was either too flashy or too plain.

The jeweler went up to him and John had expressed his dilemma and suggested that they work together to make something custom. John had liked the idea of that.

"So tell me about your lucky lady," prompted the jeweler as he took out a stylus, ready to start drawing concepts.

"She'sâ€¦" John felt at a loss for words. How could he describe her, the most amazing person he'd ever known, everything fell short. "Intelligent," he said a little dumbly. The jeweler held back an exasperated sigh, this was clearly going to be a challenge.

"How would you describe her personal style," prodded the jeweler.

Cortana wore clothes. Except when she didn't. That was pretty much all he really noticed. He hadn't realized how unobservant he was of these kind of things until he was prompted to describe her 'personal style.' What did that even mean? He quickly thought of outfits she wore often. They were definitely practical but they always had a certain flair to them, she was by no means bland, she took pride in her appearance. He glanced over at another woman in the store who was dressed very loudly with lots of jewelry and decorations, he couldn't help but wince. Cortana's outfits always had some semblance of order to them, a unified theme.

"She is practical and detail oriented, she is very subtle but elegant, refined, yet unorthodox."

"Okay, about how much are we looking at spending?"

John thought for a moment. He didn't really know how much most things cost-for the large majority of his life, if the UNSC didn't issue it to him, he didn't have it. When he retired, he realized he had quite a large sum of money, more than enough for him to live out the rest of his days.

"However much things of this nature cost," was the only answer he could really come up with. He didn't want to embarrass himself by saying something entirely too low.

The jeweler perked up considerably, "So price is no object?"

John sighed, he could sense he was cruising to a big bill, but he didn't want something ugly or of poor quality.

"I suppose not," he intoned.

"So what metals and stones are we thinking about?" The jeweler spoke quickly and excitedly. Though John found the entire process a little tedious he couldn't help but admire the man's professionalism and dedication. Every possible detail that could go into a piece of jewelry was discussed-things John would have never thought of. Not only stone cut and band thickness but the setting for the stones and various metal alloys.

John ended up agreeing on a bright silver metal that almost glowed it was so brilliant, it was mined on a moon in the Circinius System. The band would be very thin and round which wasn't really in style but John didn't care, he didn't think something bulky would suit Cortana's small fingers. The band would have two pointed small diamonds that would frame an indigo stone that was only found deep within Reach. There were extremely limited quantities of this stone because even though Reach had been re-terraformed industry and mining hadn't started up again due to the instability of the planet's eco-system. Not only did John find it fitting, Reach was where they met, it was the exact color of her eyes. The stone would be cut so that it would have as many facets as possible, it was apparently a new way of cutting gemstones that helped reflect very efficiently but was a variation on the classic cushion cut stone that had been more popular in the last twenty years. All things John had never even known existed.

"Normally I would have to tell you to come back in a week but I can push this up in priority and have it done by the end of the day,"

I must be spending an obscene amount of money, thought John to himself. He hardly cared if it meant he wouldn't have to come back to this store for a while.

He walked down the busy street and into a cafe. He sat and drank coffee and read the news while he waited for time to pass. He couldn't help but find people watching downtown interesting. People were so resilient, they had bounced back from war so quickly. It was a Saturday so there were plenty of children with their parents shopping. A flock of teenagers walked into the cafe he was sitting in, they were laughing and talking loudly. They ordered their drinks and proceeded to take over an entire corner of the cafe.

John watched them. They were beyond normal, clearly happy. One glanced over at him, a red haired girl with Black glasses.

"Hey, look, it's Coach K's brother!" she exclaimed, tapping one of her friends. The whole group proceeded to look over at him and John felt awkward.

"Hi!" she exclaimed and waved frantically. He didn't know what to do so he brought up a hand and waved slightly.

Oh God. They were coming over. Was this something people actually did, come up to relative strangers and start to carry on a conversation?

"Hi! You guys, this is Coach K's brother, he's the one who raced her and lost," she exclaimed to her friends.

Oh. So that's how they remembered it.

"Oh yeah! I remember seeing that on the news, I should've went out for track!" exclaimed a short, sandy haired male.

"How's Coach K doing, I haven't seen her since the season ended," asked the redhead sincerely.

"She is well, excited for the summer training season," he said simply. She had spoken at length about how she was going to take her team on long distance treks, something she enjoyed almost as much as her sprints. She talked about him coming along every now and then to help her time them and create exercise programs. He knew Fred could just as easily have done this task but she wanted to spend time with him.

"Well tell her that Miranda says hi!" the girl smiled and lead her group of friends out of the cafe.

Miranda. That name brought back memories for him. Some people leave this world and it is truly a shame, Miranda Keyes had been one of those people.

In an hour or two, John went to the jeweler and paid for the obscenely expensive ring. He found himself at home, looking at a still-in-pajamas, pale Cortana and a bouncy Kelly leaving their

home.

He was confused.

"She's pregnant and going to go tell Fred," continued Cortana.

Something about her still didn't feel right. Normally, Cortana would be radiating excitement and rambling about how excited she was for Kelly. Instead, she was quiet, pale and avoiding his gaze.

He saw her hand tremble as she went to take a sip of water. He moved quickly to her side, sitting on the couch next to her. Cortana took her shaky sip of water and set the glass down on the coffee table, water splashing over the rim.

"Cortana," he said, getting her attention.

She looked at him. Her eyes were wide and red from what he assumed was crying.

"What is wrong?"

She burst into tears. She started hiccuping and gasping for air while she failed to form words.

"Cortana, you need to breathe," he advised, starting to get worried. She started taking shallow, quick breaths that seemed to exacerbate her problems.

"No, take a breath, hold it," he corrected.

She took a breath and he put his hand in between her shoulder blades to feel her lungs expand.

"Okay, out."

She exhaled shakily.

"In again," he coached.

She took an even deeper breath in.

"Out now, slowly," he said after she had held it.

She slowly let the air out and she still trembled.

"Now, what's wrong? I can't fix anything when I don't even know what the problem is," he reasoned. He had absolutely no idea what could get her so worked up. She was emotional, yes, but usually rational, usually coherent.

She shook her head. "You're not going to like it," she whispered.

"Try me," he prodded. He braced himself for terrible news. She must surely be dying, there was nothing else that could be this upsetting. The ring in his pocket felt like it weighed a ton as he prepared for what she was about to say.

She put her head in her hands and mumbled something he couldn't make sense of.

"You need to speak up, even I can't hear when you mumble," he was starting to get irritated. He needed to know what was wrong so he could fix whatever it was, if he had to tear the galaxy apart again to find a solution he would do it, he'd done it before.

She sat up straight, took a deep breath and looked at him.

"I'm pregnant."

Silence. His facial expression must've conveyed the absolute shock he was feeling because she burst into tears again.

Pregnant. A baby. His baby. With Cortana. He was going to be a father.

Cortana wiped angrily at her eyes. "Just say it, this is my fault, tell me how stupid I am and how you never wanted this," she spat.

He looked at her, she was turning red with some form of misplaced anger. Is that how she thought he would react?

"John, say something, anything I don't even care what," she spoke angrily.

He looked at her. Even though she was angry and irrational right now, he loved her. This made the way forward clearer. He reached into his pocket and set the tiny metal box on the table in front of her.

Her eyes widened. "John-"

"Open it."

Her hands shook as she reached for the box and held it in her hand for a moment. She took in a deep breath and opened the box, revealing the ring he had purchased. She gasped.

"I-"

"For a long while, I have felt that I couldn't ask you to marry me-you have already given me everything, promised all you have in the world to offer, marriage seemed a petty commitment to offer compared to what you have done for me," he paused and grabbed her hands and the box, taking the ring out, "But I have promised what I can to you: forever. No matter what," he took her left hand and put it on her left ring finger. It looked how he imagined it would, perfect.

She looked at how the indigo cushion cut stone shone on her finger. It was so bright and so beautiful, it shone every color of the rainbow in its blue sparkle, the metal shone brightly almost as if it were glowing, she couldn't believe that John would even take the time to pick out something so senseless.

"I haven't said yes yet," she murmured, eyes still fixed upon the delicate ring.

He chuckled a little.

"Okay. I've thought about it. My answer is yes, but only if we do it before I get huge," she said, tearing up again.

"If you don't like it we can get something else," he said nervously about the ring.

She shook her head. "Don't you even think about it. I have no idea how you managed to pick something so perfect."

"I walked into a jewelry store and told the jeweler I didn't care how much money I spent, they're pretty good at what they do," he shrugged.

She gasped, "You really shouldn't have done that."

"Why not? I've never bought anything that doesn't serve a practical purpose, I wanted to get something of quality that you would like. Everything they had in stock was too ostentatious or not unique enough so I made something," he paused, "the middle stone is from Reach, it made me think of your eyes." he spoke quietly and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear.

She blushed. He always surprised her with the details he observed and the random acts of sweetness he performed. It humbled her, to know that he could treat her so gently and with such care. After everything he had been through and everything he had seen, there was still amazing goodness within him. She was honored that he viewed her as his equal, his partner. He had clearly thought long about this, even though she would have never anticipated it.

"I would kiss you, but a little bit before you came in I puked on Kelly's feet, so I will spare you."

"Is that normal?" he questioned worriedly.

"Unfortunately, yes. We've got a few more weeks of this if I'm as far along as I think I am," she sighed.

"How far?"

"Probably a bit over two months," she said quietly.

"Do we need to schedule a doctor appointment?"

Cortana took another sip of water and sighed. "I've been thinking about that and I'm concerned."

"About what?"

"I can't be honest with a regular doctor about my situation and even yours, I'll be viewed as a science experiment. If I'm not honest, I'm worried that I can't receive proper treatment."

"Why would you need special treatment, relative to other women, that is."

She sighed. "If my theories about you and what happened on Requiem are true, this baby is going to be part Spartan. It's completely unprecedented. If your augmentations have been integrated into your genetic code, like I think they have been, this baby will not only be

large but more than likely stronger than me in a few month's time."

"There must be testing we can have done," he spoke worriedly.

"Yes, there most assuredly is, I could do it if we had the proper equipment probably, but that's not the best option. We can't have some random doctor, we can't even begin to explain."

They both filled in the blanks about what needed to happen.

* * *

><p>Okay, I have never seen the John-as-a-father fluff trope done well, so I'm taking my stab at it. I promise it won't be nauseating and he will still be Chief, but also he's going to be John. Thanks for trusting me!<p>

8. Chapter 8

Thanks for the reviews! I sincerely love reading all of them. Plot chapter, gotta keep the ball rolling! Enjoy!

* * *

><p>John sighed and pulled up their monitor and dialed a connection he only remembered vaguely, 'in case you need me,' she had said.<p>

It rang for a while. Cortana felt apprehensive, not sure if they would get an answer.

They both sat waiting for what felt like eternity until someone picked up.

"Hello?"

"Catherine, it's me," said Cortana quietly, activating the camera in their home.

"Cortana?" Halsey's camera turned on. She looked a little older, a little wearier, but still pretty much the same. She had a prosthetic arm that she hadn't had before.

"John," she spoke, emotion clear in her voice. She gathered herself and looked around.

"It looks like you two have settled down nicely," she said almost snidely. Cortana felt confused about her relationship with the older woman. She felt like Halsey resented her and she couldn't help but return the sentiment at times.

"We need your help," John spoke directly.

"What's wrong?" she questioned.

Cortana sighed and John looked at the doctor.

"Cortana is pregnant."

Catherine's eyes widened.

"Is this true?" she looked at Cortana.

Cortana rolled her eyes. "No, he's lying. Of course it's true," she snapped. Redundancy bothered her to no end so she couldn't help but snap.

"It says you're calling from the Lamnda Aurige System, give me your coordinates, I'm on my way," she spoke quickly and started packing various items.

John quickly entered the coordinates to their home.

"Hmm, I never would've expected that," she muttered, referring to their location. "I'll be on my way shortly."

"We will have a bed turned down for you in our living room," said John quickly. Halsey gave him a weird look, like she couldn't even imagine him saying something so mundane.

"See you soon," Cortana spoke quietly. Halsey nodded and ended the transmission.

Cortana sighed. "Well, I suppose I should get dressed since we're having a guest," she said a little sarcastically.

"Are you hungry?" John questioned quietly.

"No, but I should eat anyways," she sighed.

"I'll make something bland," he said. He knew that when he came out of cryo and was nauseated bland food usually went down better.

"Thank you, I'm going to hop in the shower," she kissed him on the cheek and went to their bathroom.

John went to the kitchen and started a simple pasta. While that prepared itself, he went into the living room and pulled out the bed that was in their couch. It was entirely too small for him, but it would work for Halsey.

Cortana had moved their old bedding into a hope chest he had made last spring. He had purposely used a very fragrant wood, the bedding smelled nice and fresh as he made the bed neatly. Cortana wasn't nearly as neat when it came to making beds or anything really. She wasn't a slob but she didn't keep things military tidy.

Cortana had dressed herself comfortably, still wearing her house robe that he knew she found comforting, and came out of their bedroom. She still looked a little sick, but overall better.

"Ugh, I have no idea how we didn't notice this earlier, most of my clothes have been fitting so snugly, I thought I was just getting fat," she complained and lifted up her t-shirt. Surely enough, if John looked, her stomach protruded visibly more than it normally did. He couldn't believe it. He wasn't sure if he'd even seen a baby before, and now, in a relatively short amount of time, he was going

to have one.

While they ate dinner, Cortana looked like she was choking down every bite. John couldn't help but feel badly for her.

"It's okay, I suppose it's a good thing, it means my body is creating the necessary hormones for my body to accommodate the baby," she spoke a little awkwardly, trying to get used to the idea.

"Is there anything that helps?"

"Go get some of the ginger in the garden, I can boil it and maybe it'll soothe my stomach," she sighed, "please," she finished as she sat down on a chair in their living room. She turned on the fireplace in the living room. She had insisted on a fireplace in the living room and in their bedroom. At first he had thought it was a little excessive, but when he saw how much she thoroughly enjoyed both he didn't mind.

He went outside and dug up some of the ginger roots she requested. The sun had already set, it'd been a few hours since they had spoken with Halsey, she should be here within the hour, depending on the mode of transportation she had chosen. They would have to prepare for Catherine's arrival later into the night.

He peeled a good amount of the ginger using his pocket knife. He boiled water and chopped up the peeled root.

In a few minutes, a ginger broth had been created and he poured it into Cortana's favorite mug.

As he was carrying the promised mug to Cortana, he heard an urgent rapping on the door. In three strides he opened it to see Dr. Halsey. Even though John towered over her, he couldn't help but feel a little small in her presence-she was very commanding.

"John," she said, greeting him. He automatically reached for the equipment and bags she was carrying and stepped aside, propping the door open for her.

"Come in," he said, turning and leading her to the living room.

Cortana was sitting in an armchair with her eyes closed, listening to some music. She heard his footsteps and looked in his direction.

He set down the equipment Halsey brought and pulled up the other living room chair next to where Cortana was sitting. He gave her the broth she'd asked for.

"Mmm, thank you so much," she said quietly, holding the mug and enjoying its warmth. She sat up a little straighter.

Halsey watched John delicately hand Cortana the mug-he was gentle to her. Both she and Cortana knew what he was capable of, yet he was so relaxed in this small home. She looked at the picture on the wall of John and his medals in the shelf.

"Who took this?" she asked.

"Fred did," John replied.

"Hmm, yes, I remember seeing this now," she said.

Halsey sat down in the chair John had moved.

"Hello, Cortana," Halsey greeted.

"Hi," responded Cortana wearily.

"I'm assuming you took a pregnancy test," Halsey said dryly as she pulled out a machine.

"I took three, the first one I threw across the room, Kelly had brought some more so I took those too."

"087?" questioned Halsey, slightly surprised.

"Yeah, she and Fred actually live a few miles away, we've become close friends," replied Cortana.

A flash of hurt crossed the Doctor's face. Cortana imagined that she was lonely.

She turned on the machine and set a screen on her lap, taking a wand like apparatus in her hand, "why don't you go lay on the bed, this will be easier," she requested politely. Cortana did as she asked and propped herself up on a pillow. John moved without thinking to sit next to her, the bed creaked under his weight.

"Lift up your shirt, please." Cortana did as requested.

Halsey started pressing on various points on her abdomen. Cortana shivered at how cold her hands were. "Everything seems normal just from the feel of you, let's take a look."

Cortana nodded and Halsey put the wand on her stomach, moving it around. John looked at the screen and could see color images of what he assumed was where the baby was.

"It's been a while since I've done this," Halsey adjusted her glasses, "aaaand, there it is, listen," a rapid thump-thump-thump reverberated through the speakers.

"Is that.."

"Heartbeat," Halsey affirmed, taking down some notes. "Strong, perfect," she added clinically.

She turned the wand a little more and John could make out a tiny blob that had tiny fingers, tiny toes and even a tiny little eyelid.

"That'sâ€¦"

"Yes, that's your little one," said Halsey coolly.

Cortana looked at the image and started to weep.

John sighed. He had never seen her cry this much, Cortana was not

what he'd consider a weepy person and he'd seen her collapse into tears multiple times today-she was clearly emotionally exhausted.

"It's okay-"

"I'm not sad," she interrupted, "This is...that's us, a little you," her voice cracked.

The more John thought of it, the more he enjoyed the idea. A part of him and a part of Cortana, he couldn't help but think it was going to be a pretty interesting kid. It was a weird concept that he'd never dwelled on, the idea of two people creating an individual. Since he and Cortana didn't really have parents, it was never a situation he could've imagined, he didn't really know what parents even did except in the vaguest sense.

"I'm going to run some tests and see how similar the child will be to John, my main concern is that if John's DNA was changed to include not only immunity to composition but integrated his augmentations into his make-up, the baby is going to be pretty strong by the time you reach full term," she frowned.

"That's what I figured," Cortana sighed.

Dr. Halsey numbed a small point on Cortana's abdomen, she winced at the sensation. Halsey took an extremely thin needle and, using the imaging device, took a sample of amniotic fluid. She took the sample and put it in a sterile container.

"John," she prompted, he got up and came over to her, "open your mouth please," he leaned over and did so, she took a swab and scraped the side of his cheek.

Halsey stood up, "I'll run a panel comparing these, I brought everything I should need. Do you have anywhere I can work?"

"John has a workshop outside that has space," Cortana replied, pulling down her shirt and tying her robe again.

John quietly got up and showed her outside to their outbuilding.

He opened the doors and turned on the lights.

She examined the stainless steel work tables. "This will do nicely, what do you do in here?" She started setting up her portable lab-it looked like she planned on staying a while.

"I like woodworking and building things," he answered simply.

"Hmm, seems a little mundane for the Master Chief Petty Officer Spartan-117," she said as she mixed up some solutions.

"I've had quite a bit of excitement in my life, I've been enjoying the mundane," he said a little defensively. He felt strange about her implication.

"And now you're going to be a family man," she said, analyzing what she needed to and writing down observations. She couldn't help but feel a little angry hearing him speak in such a way. He was more than

this. He was silent.

She continued her work, focusing on the task at hand.

"Hmm, just like I thought. The child is completely unique, very fascinating, but predictable, she has rather extraordinary parents." He was extraordinary. Her greatest achievement.

She. It was a girl. He was going to have a daughter.

He turned to go inside, Catherine spoke.

"John."

He looked over his shoulder and acknowledged her.

"I had a daughter. She resented me and left me because I didn't take care of her," she looked down, "and my other children are either dead or grown with their own lives."

John knew she was referring to the Spartans. John felt oddly about her viewing him as one of her own. In some sense he was but it was somehow still strange. He had never had a mother, but if he had imagined a mother Halsey somehow didn't fit. He didn't know what a mother should be, but there was something inherently contradicting about her being a mother let alone to him.

"Miranda left to live with her father in her teen years," she continued.

It was coming together for John, he realized she was speaking of Keyes. He had heard murmurs, and now that he knew he could remember the resemblance between Miranda and her mother.

John didn't feel a need to speak, he wasn't quite sure why Halsey had spoken in the first place-perhaps the idea of children made her feel guilt, maybe she felt the need to give him advice. He didn't understand why she was acting the way she was.

"You gave me the ability to save mankind. I'm not needed anymore, so I am living this life. I am very happy. I am about to be a husband and father. I couldn't ask for more," he spoke carefully.

She felt uneasy. She knew he was right in what he was saying. The UNSC didn't need him anymore. But what about her work, the time spent creating her Spartans, making them who and what they are? What do humans crafted for destruction do in times of peace? She certainly hadn't expected him to settle down and start a family.

"So now that you are going to be a father yourself, do you ever wonder about your own mother and father?" she prodded. She wanted to see his reaction. In some masochistic sense, she was curious if he resented her in the slightest.

John felt confused. He had never thought of his own parents. He knew that Cortana sometimes thought of it, though it was purely in passing. He felt like it was so long ago, a life he hadn't led. He shook his head slightly.

"No. It doesn't matter who my biological parents were. I have

Cortana. I have a sister who visits me and I have saved the galaxy multiple times over. I am nothing but grateful," he said resolutely. It is what he had always thought, he had never had a chance to think anything else. He had been chosen to save humanity, the highest calling and honor that could have been bestowed upon him. Having a child shouldn't be able to change that.

She could remember him as a little boy, remember telling him that his mother was gone and he was needed. He had mistaken her for a mother, it couldn't have been farther from the truth. She felt guilt in mentally claiming him as a son but couldn't help herself. She felt a surge of pride, of validation. She had chosen him and she had chosen well. He was hers in almost every sense. And now he was going to have a child, a child of the likes the world had never seen before.

"You're welcome," she said a little pridefully. His thankfulness served as validation to her. She had been right all along.

When he spoke it shook her from her thoughts. "Let's go inside and speak with Cortana, she's probably tired, she gets cranky when she's tired," he mumbled.

Halsey gathered her testing materials and followed him inside.

Cortana was fidgeting in her chair anxiously.

"What did you find?" she questioned urgently.

"Your daughter shares unique genetic markers with her father, what that entails I can't exactly say. I can tell you that no other humans possess these characteristics. I think it would be best if I stayed here through the duration of your pregnancy to observe. You were right to call me, such a unique scenario would draw the interest of the entire medical community," Halsey mused.

"A daughter," Cortana sighed. She smiled a little bit at John, this was all so new but was definitely getting more and more exciting, even though it was still equal parts terrifying.

Cortana frowned, suddenly thinking about Kelly's baby. What were the implications of two Spartans having a child?

"What about Kelly and Fred?" questioned Cortana urgently, worried about her friend.

"Kelly is having a baby?" asked Halsey with disbelief.

"Kelly planned to have a baby, this," Cortana gestured to her abdomen, "was entirely unplanned."

"I'll be damned," said amazedly. She cleared her throat awkwardly. "Anyways, Kelly and Fred will have a relatively normal child, though their combined genes should produce a very strong, healthy child. Your daughter, however, will be nothing short of an anomaly, a naturally born Spartan. Perhaps this is what the Librarian intended," she mused. The possibilities were endless.

Cortana looked at Catherine. She felt uncomfortable about the look on

her face, as if she was about to discover some sort of prize. John seemed unphased but he didn't know her as well as she did. Maybe they had made the wrong choice in calling her here. She didn't know, all she had thought about was the safety of her child. She felt afraid. Though having a child seemed terrifying, she knew that she was already attached to the little speck inside of her.

"Time will tell, until then, I just want to observe and make sure that everything progresses well for you. I can check into a hotel tomorrow," she continued.

"No, Catherine," Cortana paused, feeling slightly awkward. "Please, stay with us. We don't mind, besides, it's only going to be what, seven more months?" She couldn't help but want her here, in part for the company and in part to keep an eye on her. Maybe it would be good for her to see John living the life they lived.

"Probably a little less, you're about ten weeks along," she was quiet. "We will see how long you want to put up with an old lady living in your house."

Cortana stretched and yawned. She tried to shake the uncomfortable feeling she had with a joke.

"You can help me plan a wedding then, you know John and I, we are very ostentatious," she gestured around at their cozy, modest home sarcastically as she walked towards their bedroom, "what's the old expression, knocked up? That. This knocked up teenager is going to bed."

Halsey looked over at John who had a somewhat exasperated look on his face.

"What's that about?" she couldn't help but ask.

"Cortana likes to make jokes about the fact that I'm at least thirty years older than her, claims that I 'robbed the cradle,'" he deadpanned.

"I have no idea where she gets some of that, I was much more reserved," mused Catherine.

"She is similar to you in some ways and very different in others," observed John.

"You think so?" she questioned.

"Yes. She is very much her own person."

Halsey was silent. Cortana was a direct product of her. Yes, she existed freely but undoubtedly she was a manifestation of her consciousness in some sense.

"John, come to bed, I'm lonely," Cortana called from their bedroom, breaking the awkward silence that had fallen between the two of them.

John sighed and Halsey looked at him, a little bewildered as she watched the strong hardened hero of the UNSC stand up at the behest of his pregnant fiancée. Cortana being bothered about her lack of

autonomy surprised her. It didn't add up to her.

"If you need anything, please don't hesitate to wake me," he said, dimming the lights in the room.

"You are a surprisingly good host," she mused.

"I was raised right," he quipped as he walked down the hallway.

Where in the world did he get that sense of humor? She had never, in all of her time knowing him, known him to have such a dry wit, though she supposed that he never had really had time for such things. He was extremely intelligent, as were all of her Spartans so it should've been no surprise to her that they were clever and even sarcastic, but in practice it was a little unnerving. It wasn't what he had been made for. He wasn't made for any of this, yet here they were. She felt uneasy.

It was even more unnerving to her when she heard Cortana giggling down the hallway.

"John, stop, I'm tired," she giggled as he ran his hand over her stomach and jokingly pinched at her sides, making her yelp comically.

She swatted his hand playfully. "I mean it, if the UNSC had known how capable I was as a warrior they would've said 'Sierra-11who?' I'll strike when you least expect it," she teased.

He couldn't help but smile at her light demeanor. He enjoyed her sarcastic remarks and her playful nature. After the emotions of the day it felt nice to be a little lighthearted

He ran his hand over her stomach again, he couldn't help it, he couldn't stop thinking about it. Nothing was _really_ different from yesterday but somehow everything was changed. He shouldn't be so surprised about what could change in a day-it'd happened to him many times before, but he was shocked all the same.

"How are you feeling?" he questioned quietly.

"I'm still kind of in shock. It was quite a day, after all, I found out I'm pregnant and got engaged," she mused.

"Mm," he agreed.

She dimmed the lights and laid back. "Speaking of which, what were you thinking of in the way of a wedding?"

He looked at her blankly. "Are you actually asking what my thoughts on a wedding ceremony are?"

"Well I don't know, maybe you have some sort of grandiose plan, doves, tulle, seven tiered cakes, don't hold back your innermost desires," she teased. She didn't see it but she knew he rolled his eyes.

"In all seriousness, I think we should do something simple. Invite only a few people, have it at some sort of resort, have dinner and

drinks on us for everyone then spend a few days there. Preston Cole married an insurrectionist on this planet, I think it's a pretty common wedding destination and there are some great sights to see."

"That sounds nice," he agreed.

"Who do we invite?" she questioned.

John had no idea.

"Kelly, Fred," he stated.

"Duh," she said sarcastically. "add Catherine to the list of obvious guests. I'm stumped after them."

"Do we have to invite anyone else?" he asked, a little perplexed.

"I mean, I suppose not, but I feel like there's got to be a few others."

John thought on the Halo Campaign. Johnson was dead. Keyes was dead. Miranda was dead. Everyone was dead.

"Thel'Vadam?" he said, wondering what her reaction would be.

Cortana started laughing. "Oh my gosh, can you imagine? I suppose we could invite him, though I'm not sure how much he would get out of it, though Sanghelli do have marriage it's different. Humans have visited Sanghelios recently, perhaps it would be good. We'd have to get it cleared but I think it'd be entirely possible," she mused.

John thought upon the Sangheli. He was a true warrior and regarded him with great respect. He would pave the way for the new world they would inherit.

"Were it so easy," he mocked.

Cortana started laughing in earnest at this point. "John I didn't know you were so good at impressions."

"I'm not," he stated bluntly.

"Do an impression of me," she demanded.

"No."

"Yes," she argued.

"You're not going to let me sleep unless I do this, am I right?" he groaned.

He felt her nod and he sighed. "You do know you don't have to wait 'til the last minute just to impress me, right?" he mimicked, his voice the tiniest bit higher than his speaking voice but not enough to be too silly, he wasn't that committed to the impression.

She continued to laugh. She remembered saying that to him once. It was true, they had had a lot of close calls, she had to wonder at

times if he was being a little dramatic.

She sighed. "Who else do we invite though?" she continued.

"I thought you were tired," he complained.

"I am but my mind is racing," she sighed.

John rested his arm above his head. "How about Lasky?" he questioned, getting drowsier by the minute.

"Ooh, that's a good idea, he was very kind to me despite my deteriorating condition on the Infinity. We should give him a plus one so he doesn't feel awkward though," she closed her eyes and sighed, "that's good enough for now, if we don't come up with more people by the end of the week we'll just send out invitations, or I guess I'll message Kelly and we can send an invite to Lasky," she laughed.

"Sounds fine to me."

"Mm," she snuggled up against him, getting ready to sleep.

"John?" she whispered.

"What," he said, a little exasperated at her restlessness.

"I'm sorry about how I acted today, I shouldn't have assumed you'd be angry with me, I was afraid myself," she spoke lowly, her shame showing in her tone.

"It's okay, I understand," he replied.

"Are you scared?" she whispered even more quietly.

"Of course," he said sleepily.

"What are we going to do," she sighed.

"Have a baby, I suppose," he said matter of factly.

"John, seriously," she prodded.

He groaned, he was really exhausted and wanted to sleep. "Aren't you the one who said that no one is a ready parent but it somehow works out?"

"I did say that," she replied sleepily, "you really do listen when I talk."

"Mm," he agreed.

"Goodnight John," she whispered.

He was asleep.

* * *

><p>Like I said, little bit of a plot chapter. I like to think ultrasound technology would be that good in 500 years, haha. I take a

lot of liberties with things like that.<p>

9. Chapter 9

"This is the absolute worst," Cortana groaned while she wretched into the toilet. A little over week had passed since she had found out that she was pregnant and she was very quickly growing weary of the entire thing.

Catherine leaned against the doorjamb, "Someone is knocking."

"I am a little otherwise-" she wretched, "preoccupied," she moaned. "It's a Sunday, it's probably just Kelly and Fred, no one else ever visits, they usually come over for breakfast on Sunday, please go let them in."

Catherine's heart sped up a little bit. She hadn't seen Kelly or Fred in so long, imagining them here with Cortana and John as friends and neighbors was also strange, it simply didn't fit into her perception of them.

She walked to the door and saw Fred and Kelly, they had aged well, they hardly looked a day over thirty, despite Fred's prematurely grey hair. They looked younger than John even though they were the same age.

"Doctor Halsey," greeted Fred.

They walked inside and saw how she had taken over the living room.

"Is something wrong with Cortana?" questioned Kelly worriedly. She hadn't heard much from Cortana over the past week which was rather uncommon-she was very chatty, especially when compared to anyone Kelly had ever spoken to.

"I'm here to observe her, she can't really go to a normal doctor."

Kelly snapped her head with an inhuman quickness towards the bathroom when she heard Cortana wretch loudly. Catherine was surprised when she saw Kelly walk quickly towards the bathroom. Her action was urgent, displaying great concern. She would've never imagined the two of them being close.

She walked into the kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee.

"Frederic, would you like coffee?" she questioned.

"Yes please, thank you," he answered politely as he sat down across from the doctor.

In the bathroom, Kelly sighed and rubbed Cortana's back soothingly.

"I think I'm done for now," Cortana sighed. She got up and swished her mouth with water and ran a hand through her hair.

"I brought you something," said Kelly reaching into her purse.

They were a colorfully labeled package of lozenges.

"They're supposed to help with nausea," stated Kelly.

"Mm, give me twenty of them," joked Cortana ripping open the package and popping one into her mouth.

They walked into the kitchen together.

"These aren't half bad Kelly, thank you," she said, sucking on the lozenge.

"They got good reviews so I bought a few bags if you need more," she said calmly, pouring herself a cup of coffee and starting breakfast.

"Ugh, seriously you're not puking your brains out?" Cortana asked amazedly.

Kelly shook her head. "I feel great, actually."

"Bitch," Cortana muttered under her breath. Kelly laughed at her anguish.

John came inside with a bunch of vegetables and fruit from outside. He started washing things off and cutting them up for breakfast.

Catherine couldn't get over how surreal the entire experience was, seeing her Spartans, her perfect soldiers, eating Sunday brunch together, all of them about to be parents. It was not what she had envisioned, she had never anticipated that she'd live to see their retirement, or that there would be an entire Spartan branch of the UNSC to replace them. Even though she had her own personal qualms with said program, she could acknowledge that times were changing.

Breakfast was done and everyone dug into their food except Cortana who was mostly picking at her's disgustedly, clearly trying not to vomit.

"John, Fred and I are going up the mountain today, do you want to come?"

Catherine watched him look over at Cortana, seeking approval.

"Go ahead, I plan on puking intermittently through the day and in between trying to get some reading done, maybe entertain our guest," she said a little sarcastically.

"I'm quite capable of entertaining myself," Catherine drawled.

"Mhmm," sighed Cortana.

The Spartans left for their mountain hike and Cortana sighed.

"Is this what your day consists of, John goes out and spends the day

outside while you read books?"

"You're so cynical," she sighed, folding a shirt, "I have been doing some independent research on the Forerunner glyphs I managed to document," she paused, debating how much information she wanted to disclose, "Since I came back from the Domain, I've been fascinated by these, strangely enough, since John's encounter with the Librarian he's been able to read Forerunner glyphs so I've been running some of this by him, I'm close to figuring out a way to implement more efficient, precise slipstream travel," she ran a hand through her hair, "However, it doesn't matter because even though I'm more than likely the most brilliant mind in the galaxy I have no accreditation from any institution," she groaned.

"I can fix that," replied Catherine.

Cortana glanced at her, "I'm listening," she prodded.

"I'm an honorary faculty member at multiple institutions, if I pull some strings I can get documentation of you graduating from pretty much anywhere you'd want, present your work on Forerunner glyphs and knowledge as a thesis and it most surely could be applied to a PhD from MIT in astrophysics, if you actually can figure out how the Forerunner navigated intergalactic travel through the accurate use of slipspace," she said.

Cortana felt a rush of excitement. She had missed solving problems, constantly calculating impulses from John's mind to MJOLNIR had been only a small part of their team work, she missed the fast pace at times.

"I would love that, and of course I'm going to figure it out, I'm brilliant," she smiled arrogantly.

"You could become a Professor at any institution of your choosing via correspondence if you simply built an office equipped with the necessary satellite communications."

"All of my achievements are tied to the UNSC, in which I didn't technically serve," argued Cortana.

"Let me look into it," the Doctor replied.

"Why do you want to do this for me?" questioned Cortana quietly.

"Because you are brilliant, you deserve recognition for your work, you could advance mankind. I don't subscribe to any religion, but if there is fate you were fated to continue to exist as something other than a construct, science cannot explain everything and it cannot explain what happened to you. I place value in the unknown, just like I acknowledge that what is between you and John is something I cannot reason or explain, it is important, perhaps even to the advancement of mankind. "

Cortana's eyes widened. She'd never thought of it that way, never thought of her feelings for him as monumental even though they most assuredly were-she should've been limited to what Halsey's feelings for him were, she shouldn't have been able to evolve the way she had. John's encounter with the Librarian had changed him and her time

existing in the Domain had changed her and gave her a corporeal form. There were endless possibilities.

"If there is a God, it exists in the Domain," agreed Cortana. She thought about her days on the Halo-Campaign, as an AI.

"I miss it sometimes, I think even more than John does," she sighed, sipping some more ginger water she'd made. "Not only do I miss the neurological connection I shared with John, knowing when and where he was going to move and moving with him, knowing everything about his being from his brain activity to knowing his heartbeat, I miss the feeling of power it gave me. I was always arrogant, my encounter with the Gravemind showed me how arrogant I truly was, but I still survived. I felt strong. Now I feelâ€¦" she paused, "terribly normal."

Catherine felt sympathetic to Cortana. She imagined that it was difficult, her vast intellect crippled by human constraints and living in the middle of nowhere. "John lost very little, he is not proud, he will go wherever he is needed. You, on the other hand, have my pride and ambition and I hate to see you not living up to your potential. You have never been, nor will you ever be normal," insisted Catherine. She spoke with a certain degree of arrogance. Cortana was a direct product of her intellect, she would never be normal.

"I am happy here, happy to see John. Hell, I'm happy to be having his baby even though it's beyond unexpected. I have no idea what kind of parents we're going to be, I look at Kelly and I can just see her as a mother, as odd as that may sound to you she's very good with children, she has one of the biggest hearts I've ever seen. Even John, I can see him as a father, he's fiercely loyal and protective, strong and even playful when he feels like it. Out of all human experiences, I have the hardest time imagining myself as a mother," Cortana sighed.

Catherine understood. She had been a failure as a mother. Her daughter was dead.

Halsey, thinking upon families and children, couldn't help but ask, "how did you and John decide to get married?" It seemed so strange that they would choose such an institution.

She smiled softly at the memory. "When I found out I was pregnant I kind of lost it, I had all of these irrational thoughts, that John would be angry with me, that he'd even leave me, then he walks in the door and asks me to marry him," she laughed nervously. "It was as simple as that, when he wants things he usually figures out a way to make it happen."

Catherine tried to shake the impulse but couldn't, "Let me see," she said, as close as she'd been to gushing about anything in a while, grabbing Cortana's left hand to look at the ring. Her eyes widened. She had no idea that John would have the capacity to such thought into an entirely useless object.

"I had no idea he had such fine taste in jewelry," she said slightly in awe.

"I didn't either, not to say that I'd imagined this kind of scenario,

but if I had had to imagine John buying me a wedding band I would've imagined something extremely practical and, well, Spartan I suppose."

"He is rather sentimental about most things though, now that I think upon it," murmured Catherine, adjusting the ring in the light to see the stone shimmer.

"What are you thinking about specifically?"

"After you sacrificed yourself, he carried around your chip and service tags with an almost religious devotion, he refused to surrender them. When he came to me asking for help finding you, he would hold them in his hand and stare at them." She remembered it well because it had been so unexpected.

"Johnâ€¦" she sighed. She hated thinking about him broken, lonely, and sad. She had hoped that he'd be able to move on without her but apparently even he wasn't that strong.

Cortana smiled warmly. "I really do know how to pick 'em."

* * *

><p>Shorter interlude chapter, next chapter is longer. Thank you so much for reviewing, they seriously make my entire life. :D :D<p>

10. Chapter 10

This is one of my FAVORITE chapters I've written so I'm posting a little closer together than I normally do. When you guys review I get excited and post faster as well. Bwahaha. Enjoy!

* * *

><p>Kelly sprinted quickly up the rocky face of the mountain, her hands dug into the rock holds without a problem. She put all of her thoughts and feelings into the physical activity at hand.<p>

Fred liked to climb slowly, he liked to observe from different viewpoints and contemplate the light and shadows created on the various faces of the mountain. Seeing from such a high vantage point gave him perspective on himself and the universe, which brought him peace.

John used physical activity to focus inward, to sort out his own thoughts. For years he had been used to hearing Cortana constantly, a running inner monologue. Now, it was quiet and he replaced the chatter with his own thoughts as he pulled himself up the mountain.

I'm going to be a father.

>What is a father?

>What do babies need?

>What do daughters need?

>Will she be safe?

>Can I make her safe?

>Will Cortana be safe?

>Will this hurt her?
>Have I hurt her?

Climbing was interesting, it combined both endurance, strength and high intensity physical exercise all in one activity. John liked how it made him feel out of breath. It was hard to find physical challenges difficult enough for him, running was the easiest to satisfy, he could just run forty miles at a quick pace and he'd have to push to finish. It would remind him of when Chief Mendez would yell at them when they were little and he could tell when one of them wanted to give up during PT, he'd say things like "You're already hurting, it's not going to stop, make it mean something!" It was a physical strain he found relieving, comforting even. Even if there had been a military station nearby, he had ruined ODST gyms by trying to exercise among them. He had seen the specialized Spartan gym bays on the Infinity and had definitely been impressed-there were newer, denser metals that could be the size of a dinner plate and weigh as much as 500 pounds.

Those resources weren't available to him in the outer colonies. He probably could've purchased said equipment, but it seemed like such a hassle. Instead he tried to find challenges that he could create, either in nature or by simply pushing himself.

He pulled himself up to the summit where Kelly sat on top, staring down at everything below her. On many planets, they would've been high into the clouds but the atmosphere here made clouds higher up than average so they could see the view below them very easily.

She sat with her shirt pulled up, looking at her abdomen, tracing a finger over it mindlessly. On Cortana, the slightly raised bump on her stomach didn't look too strange-it blended in with the smoothness of her body and the softness of her hips which is why John really hadn't noticed much of a change until the past week. Kelly, on the other hand, had slim hips and hard muscle, her stomach looked almost as if it were bulging out of her, a hard, tiny, bump that was her forming child.

John couldn't help but stare at her a little bit. It was strange to see Kelly so enamored with something so simple. She pulled down her shirt slowly and continued to look off into the distance.

After about twenty minutes, Fred climbed up to the summit. He sat alongside Kelly and wrapped an arm around her waist. She leaned her head onto his shoulder and John couldn't help but feel lonely.

He remembered the time he had carried Cortana up this mountain. She had tried to keep up with him out of spite for a good part of it but when it had gotten to be too much, John picked her up without asking and carried her up. She threw a fit for part of the way, insisting she could make it on her own if he just gave her enough time, despite the fact that her face had been flushed bright red and she had broken out into quite the sweat while John hadn't even been breathing hard. When they had made it to the top of the mountain, she sighed and thanked him reluctantly even though she most definitely could've made it up herself. She had winked at him when she said that, her own way of joking at him.

She had fallen asleep on his back while they descended the mountain. He remembered dressing her in her nightgown, pulling back the covers

of their bed and tucking her in she had been so exhausted.

"Fred, send the pod up to take a picture of all three of us up here," Kelly said lightly. She had really gotten into documenting as many things as she possibly could-she had shown John numerous photo albums she'd made just of the past few months. He had never seen so many pictures of himself. It was nice to document memories in some capacity.

John sat down next to them and looked at the hovering camera pod. He didn't smile, he seldom smiled artificially, like for a photo or when saying hello to someone, unless it had actually brought him joy.

Kelly didn't smile but her entire being emanated joy. He could feel her happiness, her anticipation. Cortana was the opposite. She was angry most of the week, he even found himself wanting to avoid her and her rapid mood swings when he'd never wanted to avoid her in his time knowing her.

"How are you feeling?" questioned Fred quietly.

"I feel better than I've ever felt. I feel fast, strong and excited. Doctor says I can continue to do the activities I enjoy until my third trimester, then I'll just have to limit my physical activity to more low-impact activity." she said smiling softly.

John started to worry. Why did Kelly feel so happy, healthy and enthusiastic while Cortana was nauseated and miserable? It seemed odd to think that Spartans were better at carrying children, that wasn't their purpose but here they were. John worried that his contribution would affect Cortana adversely, that their daughter would end up harming her. He thought upon exactly how breakable Cortana was.

"John?" questioned Kelly.

He shook his head, losing his train of thought.

"What?"

She looked at him confidently. "Don't worry about Cortana, she's going to be fine, everything she's experiencing is relatively normal for women in their first trimester of pregnancy."

Fred pressed a button and took a picture of John and Kelly together. The sun was setting and he liked the shadows it made on their faces. Kelly's face was angular, her jaw strong, her eyes wide set and her lips thin. She had random superficial scars that peppered her face. She was Fred's favorite subject. She was beautiful beyond compare in his eyes.

When they had embarked on the daunting process of starting a sexual relationship, he had been apprehensive to say the least. He had been able to appreciate that she was pleasing to look at but sexual attraction was a different thing entirely.

When they started treatment, things started to change for him very quickly.

Every tiny facial expression she made, the way the light would catch in her eyes, how her hair looked with wind tangling it, her long arms and legs, her pale skin, even the way she smelled all became daily realizations, daily things he discovered not only by seeing them but in his reactions.

One evening, perhaps two days after they had started the treatment, Kelly was in the bathroom. He watched her splash water on her face. She noticed his presence before she reached for a towel to wipe her face and the sight captivated him-the droplets of water clung to her eyelashes and wet her hairline, a few drops dripped from her upper lip and a few more crept down her neck and disappeared underneath her tank top to the hollow between her breasts.

He had never wanted anything so badly and it was an extremely uncomfortable feeling.

"Fred?" she had questioned him quietly, seeming a little nervous.

He moved towards her and touched her face, running his thumb over her lips, catching the water. Her eyes were wide in shock.

"What do you feel?" she whispered softly.

"Something," was all he could respond with.

She leaned towards him and kissed him softly. They had done this before, and it had often felt awkward, as if he were simply doing any other physical action tied to Kelly, were it shaking her hand or pushing her out of the line of fire, there had been no particular sensation attached to the action.

It was different this time. He deepened their kiss and grabbed her face. It went from being a tiny spark to an inferno, he couldn't control it, he was starting to feel desperate and the noises he was making were showing it, just from kissing her.

He started taking off her clothes. He didn't really know why, he just knew she was wearing far too much. She pulled off his shirt and continued to frantically kiss him. She bit and pulled at his lips and he couldn't even begin to explain why he found it so erotic, it simply was. He would've never even known how to describe it, it was physical and intuitive all of a sudden. She pulled off her own skirt and reached to unbuckle his pants.

They fell to the floor with a definitive sound and they both stared at each other.

The moment changed. There was confusion again. He realized that they were both naked, staring at one another. He had never looked at her body for its differences from his-she was a Spartan just like himself, her speed legendary. He looked at her figure and knew he wasn't thinking of her speed. It made him feel nervous and confused. Almost dazed.

She nervously looked at him, her apprehension palpable. They didn't speak as she turned on the shower water and stepped into the stream.

He felt so overwhelmed, looking at her with the water running down

her body, in between her breasts and across her hips. It was something he'd seen before but never appreciated, never thought of it in this context.

She reached out her hand to him and he took it.

She pulled him towards her and into the water. She drew his hand to her face and closed her eyes, she brought his hand to her lips and dragged his fingers over them, moving his hand down the column of her throat and over to her breasts.

She pressed herself into him and he palmed her breast. She sharply took in breath.

"Please, do that," she whispered. He continued to touch her even when she roughly brought him to her mouth, kissing him so fiercely her teeth bumped against his. He could feel his body reacting to the sensation.

When she reached down and grabbed him he moaned audibly.

She was curious, he could tell as she touched him. She was fumbling and almost graceless but it somehow endeared him to her even more. He'd never felt anything so teasingly good, so completely wonderful yet incomplete.

Her face while she observed him was one he'd see before-she was assessing a challenge, weighing her options and planning her best strategy.

She had clearly chosen her plan when she pushed him against the wall of the shower and started moving her hand in earnest.

He knew what the sensation was, in his adolescence he'd had awkward, fumbling orgasms in the secrecy of the night before the urge had disappeared entirely-he supposed that it was only natural at the onset of puberty. This was something entirely different, having her see him this way, seeing his reaction and his vulnerability.

He stopped her when he was worried he'd finish. Soaking wet, they ran to their bed. She pulled him on top of her and kissed him with the same ferocity as earlier. She was so intense, so focused on what she wanted, it was her very nature but Fred couldn't help but feel surprised at the overall effect.

He broke away from her and looked at her. Her hair was wet and splayed all over their pillows. Her cheeks were rosy and her lips slightly swollen. He kissed her softly and slowly, enjoying how she felt against him, their bodies still wet and sliding against each other. They broke apart again and he looked into her eyes. This close up, he could see the variances in color between their eyes. The ocular enhancements gave an overall unifying appearance to the Spartan-II eye but he could see a lighter blue when he examined Kelly's eyes more closely. He had never seen this kind of look in her eyes. It was stunning to him, her intensity, her passion, everything about her he wished he could take into himself and make it part of him. She was so many things he was not. If he could, he would take a photo of this moment, of her eyes. Instead he looked at her, memorizing every detail, committing her gaze to memory so he would never forget.

"Is this what you want?" he couldn't help but ask. He wanted her. He knew that, in some sense, she wanted him too, but he had to be sure.

She took a deep breath and simply nodded.

He'd never done this before and had hardly thought of it even.

It was awkward. She even winced uncomfortably.

"Are you in pain?"

She simply looked at him as if to say 'I have run into explosions and gunfire, this is not painful,'

"No. Just, give me a second," she continued to squirm underneath him a little bit, trying to adjust properly to the foreign feeling.

She exhaled quickly and looked at him. "Okay, try again," she said.

As he moved, he could see her wince a little bit here and there, but it didn't seem as bad as before.

He could feel himself losing control, he tried to stop moving and she shook her head. "No, it's okay," she said quickly, reading his thoughts.

When he finished, he sighed. It had felt wonderful, but he couldn't help but feel guilty, until Kelly jumped out of bed quickly and did a handstand. She started doing press-ups, completely naked.

He normally didn't question her and her sometimes oddly spirited antics, but even he couldn't help but ask: "What in the world are you doing?"

"Read on a pregnancy forum that putting yourself upside down after sex can help conception, I think it's an old wives tale, but if anything it's fun," she laughed.

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "You're notâ€¦upset?"

She continued to do her press-ups but craned her neck and looked at him, a perplexed expression on her face.

"Upset? Why would I be upset?"

"Because you didn'tâ€¦" he felt awkward again.

"I think that's pretty normal, we'll work on it. For now I'm just happy to be with you, besides, it was still enjoyable," she smirked and he couldn't help but feel flushed. Even though they were both sitting in their bedroom naked while he watched her do nude press-ups, he still had the nerve to feel embarrassed.

She snapped quickly back up to her feet very quickly, like she did everything. She sprung herself onto their bed, shaking the whole frame. She was energetic almost to the point of hyperactivity. She had been that way since they were children, only slowing down when it

was absolutely required. She had been punished when they were young for fidgeting almost constantly. A drill instructor had screamed himself hoarse when she fidgeted in formation. "Move that arm in formation again and I am going to take it as a threat, chop off that arm and beat you senseless with it!" Fred nearly chuckled at the memory. She was perhaps the most extroverted of all of them, and the most willful-she had tried to escape three times after being conscripted. It was still very apparent in her adult personality.

She sat on the bed and propped a pillow underneath her back, elevating her hips. He glanced at her.

"What? No science to prove it doesn't work, can't hurt," she teased, sensing his skepticism.

Fred looked at her up on the mountaintop with the man that he knew she considered her brother. He had always viewed John as an excellent leader and a brother-in-arms, but the relationship he and Kelly shared was special. Something in Kelly had changed, seeing him again. She had talked about him a long time while she had been on duty with the new Spartans-talked about how she knew he was alive, knew he was out there and how someday she swore she'd find him. When she had heard he went AWOL, she added onto that list-she swore she would punch him in the face. She hadn't done that. She'd simply wept over how much she had missed him and how much she still missed Sam.

Looking at them together, he felt that they could maybe use some time together. They would probably be short on it soon.

"I'm going to go back, I have some editing to do."

Kelly smiled and gestured for him to bend down. He did so and she kissed him. When she pulled away she whispered quietly in his ear, "thank you." Thank you for knowing what I need. Thank you for understanding me. These were the unsaid things Fred knew she meant with her gratitude.

Kelly sighed and looked off into the sunset.

"So, it's been a week, want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what," he intoned.

"Talk about how you're gonna be a dad," she smiled.

"Not much to talk about," he replied.

"Aren't you the least bit excited?"

He didn't speak.

"It is a lot," she agreed, reading into his silence "but for what it's worth, I think you'll be a great dad."

"What makes you think that?" he spoke.

"You're a great brother, for starters," she smiled at him and he couldn't help but feel his heart clench a little at her affection.

"You're smart, you're kind, self-sacrificing, I think those are all great things for fathers to be. I know you don't have a memory of a father, besides Chief Mendez I suppose. I wouldn't recommend yelling that much, you'll age quickly," she laughed a little.

He leaned back and ran a hand through his hair. "It just seems strange. It was easy for me to just be with Cortana, I had been with her for so long, it was more accurate to say that she was a part of me than anything else. I don't know how to love a child. I don't think I've even seen a baby before, really. Or even a pregnant female for that matter."

"Well, your child will be a part of Cortana and you know how to love her, so you could start with that, but most of all I think you'll just know. You're the lucky one, remember?" she smiled softly at him.

She ran her hand over her stomach again, her face turning solemn.

"I haven't told Fred yet, but I'm naming this baby Sam. Samantha if it's a girl, Samuel if it's a boy," she said quietly.

In that moment, John could see all of the grief and loneliness she had felt in the years they had been separated.

"We made a good team, us three," she continued. "You're so serious, such an excellent leader, I would've, and still would, follow you anywhere. Sam was so...he was just so damn funny. He was so strong and he could do pretty much anything. He was loyal and he was a great friend and brother. He was such an idiot. I remember when I was recovering from our procedures and I was hearing rumors about me being washed out if I didn't recover within the week, he would come over to me and give me these crazy pep talks, he'd do things like literally yell directly at my legs to stop reacting like pansies and catch up with the rest of me."

"Oddly enough I remember that," he laughed a little bit. "I had a hard time with my eyes, I couldn't see for a while until it all snapped together. I remember hearing him running around like crazy, trying to get the two of us to quit puking and feeling like we had been run over by a Scorpion," John smiled at the memory. Sam had been so strong and refreshingly simple. He was the most loyal person John had ever known and his best friend before Cortana. His second command, he had taken bullets and thrown tanks for him. Sam would, and did, do anything for all of them.

"I think about him so much, I know that so many others have died and it's what he wanted, that he wanted to go out with a bang fighting but some days it's just so hard," she whispered, her voice wavering a little bit, "when I saw you again John, I could just see him, I could see us three together again, I know he'd be so goofy like he always was. Then I remembered he was dead. Every day I think about it, I wish I could just say 'No,' and get him back. Not all of us can look death in the eye and just say 'no', huh Chief?" she cried silently, just like she had the day Sam died. She was the only person he'd ever known who could cry nobly, cry without looking broken. Kelly was a woman who could wear tears and seem stronger, fiercer. He had always admired her ability to let her feelings make her stronger, it was very different from his natural reaction to emotion. She would take her love and grief for Sam and let it make her an amazing

mother.

"He'd be happy that we are together now," John said quietly. It was an odd thing to say, to hypothetically speak of the dead but it felt right somehow. John knew it was true.

She didn't speak, but she nodded, reached over and grabbed his hand. She found comfort in knowing he understood, knowing that he missed their brother too.

They sat like that, silently until the sun set and the stars came out.

They climbed down the mountain quickly, jumping large distances partly to save time and partly for the rush it provided.

When they had reached the base, Kelly looked over at John. They both had no trouble seeing in the darkness, he could easily see her slightly pained expression.

"Are you going to be okay?" he couldn't help but ask.

"I think so. It's nice to talk sometimes. At least for me," she smiled. "You usually let Cortana do most of the talking, don't you?"

"She doesn't let me get a word in edgewise," he stated dryly.

Kelly smiled softly. "She has been an invaluable friend to me."

"She is special," John replied simply.

"I know I told you this once before, but I really mean it when I say I understand why you'd tear apart the entire galaxy and abandon everything for her. When I had heard about you going missing, I was angry. I couldn't believe you would abandon your duties and the mission the way you had. It makes sense now. She has become dear to me," she looked off into the direction of her home, "I'm going to go sleep, I've been needing more sleep than usual," she paused and her face took on the same softness he associated with Kelly, an intangible goodness that in part defined her.

"Goodnight, John," she said softly.

"Goodnight Kelly."

11. Chapter 11

A short-ish fluffy chapter but a chapter I enjoy all the same. le sigh- oh Halo, how I adore thee. Hope you all enjoy, thank you those of you that review, it seriously brightens my day! You guys are my stars. lol.

* * *

><p>John ran home quickly-even though Cortana's moods were rather volatile, he missed her presence and her chatter.<p>

The house was quiet as he walked in.

"Cortana?" he called.

"Bedroom," came a distracted reply.

He walked into their bedroom and saw Cortana sitting cross-legged on their bed. She had four diagrams and holographic projections floating around her. One was of Forerunner glyphs, another of an engine and the other of what appeared to be slipspace ruptures occurring, on a loop. He could tell she was frustrated.

"The Forerunner had a much vaster knowledge in their understanding of slipstream space. If I could just figure out a few more things, I would be able to create an engine that would be able to travel intergalactically, completely revolutionizing...well, everything," she paused, "but I am having a difficult time interpreting some of it. I'm relying largely on what I learned about the Halo Array-the Halo Array was capable of firing into slipspace, affecting targets both in the first dimension of space and slipspace," she sounded almost like she was talking to herself.

"I'm close, I know it. It would lead to slipspace jumps that are actually accurate and didn't take months on civilian vessels that aren't manned with smart AIs, which is far too expensive with technology as it is. This would potentially change that. I've already compiled more information on slipspace and the seven dimensions than any living individual, but I am struggling with how to implement it into a device that could accurately produce results," she trailed off.

He watched her stare in deep thought as she rearranged numbers and symbols. He went and washed up for bed, brushing his teeth and showering the grime of the mountain off of himself. He listened to her murmur to herself while she worked, he found it pleasant.

He walked out of the bathroom, draped only in a towel and changed into his sleeping clothes. She didn't even glance at him like she normally would, she was clearly focused.

He went and sat on their bed. The light from the projections cast her in a blue light. He was finding himself fixated on her and her resolved expression to figure out whatever she was trying to work out. John considered himself intelligent but whatever she was working on went way over his head.

As subtly as he could, he went behind her so she was sitting between his legs. He wrapped his arms around her waist and ran his hands down her sides and continued down to the tops of her legs.

She still managed to focus on her work.

John was starting to feel a little frustrated. He normally didn't get so restless but he also wasn't used to being ignored entirely by her. Perhaps it was a little childish, to want her attention the way he did.

"It's dark out," he murmured.

"Is it? I hadn't noticed," she replied distractedly, expanding a diagram of a Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine. He rested his chin on

her shoulder and continued to trace circles on the tops of her thighs.

"I can't make sense of this," he said after a minute of trying to decipher what she was working on as she wrote an equation with her fingertip.

"Quiet, I'm working, I'll get to you in a minute," she murmured. "And of course you can't make sense of it, you're not a meat bag but this is way over your head," she said almost as an afterthought.

Oh. She was in that kind of mood. He would remember to point out how she couldn't reach the top shelf in the kitchen. _She's not that short but the shelf is definitely over her head,_ he thought to himself. It was usually best when he kept those kind of comments to himself.

She really was in no mood. She arranged a few other things around and sighed exasperatedly. After about twenty minutes, she grabbed all of the projections and threw them aside, finally losing patience. John heard the computer automatically power down.

"Frustrating. I don't know why I'm working so hard on this," she sighed rubbing her temples and leaning back into his chest.

He started rubbing her neck gently.

"Mmmm, that is nice," she sighed.

"I can be nice," he said quietly.

"I know you can, I love seeing you try so hard," she teased.

"I bet you do," he commented dryly. He knew that she rather enjoyed frustrating him when she could. It was a difficult task, he was an extremely patient person, and her patience wore thin much more quickly than his own. When she had an opportunity to make him uncomfortable or even slightly irritated she savored it, she found it almost comical.

She grabbed his hand that wasn't rubbing her neck and brought it to her mouth and kissed it.

"You're really quite sweet, no one besides me would guess it but my data is conclusive," she tilted her head and kissed him. He ran his hand through her hair loving how smooth and soft it was. He'd missed her, he hadn't held her or kissed in a while, having a guest was distracting and preoccupying.

"Cortana, I've-

They froze. Cortana slowly pulled away from John, trying to avoid the flustered appearance of a teenager caught red handed. They were grown adults and in their bedroom, they had nothing to be embarrassed about...even though the situation was awkward.

Dr. Halsey stood in their bedroom door, carrying a tablet and a glass of water.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize John had come home and I had something

for you," Dr. Halsey didn't seem too phased but it was still a relatively uncomfortable scene.

"No, it's fine, I should shut my door. Or get an office. Perhaps both," she sighed and fought the blush creeping up her neck. She still leaned back into John's chest, not really feeling like moving from the comfortable spot she was in.

"I took the liberty of printing this, for the both of you," she said, walking into their room and handing Cortana a digital square picture. It cycled through the images Halsey had shown of their daughter.

Cortana smiled.

"Thank you, this is," Cortana paused, "this is really wonderful." She was slightly surprised at Catherine's consideration.

John looked over her shoulder and ran his hand over her stomach again, almost without thinking about it.

"See look John, little toes already, she has ten, that's good, she's normal that way," she chuckled.

"I see," he observed. He could see tiny fingers starting to form and even where her eyes would be. At this point, the picture looked like a tiny alien.

"She looks like a little fish," he observed.

Cortana laughed, "You did not just call our daughter a little fish."

"She is 'breathing' amniotic fluid right now so John has a point," concurred Halsey.

"Well then she's my fish," pouted Cortana, "It's okay, mommy loves you even if you look like a little Unggoy freak right now," she cooed sarcastically.

Catherine couldn't help but chuckle.

"I wouldn't go that far," said John.

"Everything looks fine still, I'm thinking we'll place your due date around March 23," Catherine stated glancing at her notes.

Until this moment, John hadn't even thought of how the baby would get out. Or when. Or where.

"What do you want for when you have the baby?"

Cortana sighed, "In all honesty, I'd prefer to just be at home unless something truly terrible happens. Dr. Halsey is just as equipped as any doctor or hospital unless the baby is born extremely early or something, but we'd have time in advance to plan for that if the situation arose."

This sounded nice to John. He wasn't a fan of hospitals. Too many sick people. He looked to Dr. Halsey to try and gauge her

opinion.

"I think that's fine, but if you're expecting me to hold your hand through this whole thing you're out of luck, I have terrible bedside manner, and while I have everything here needed to save the life of either you or the baby, I'm no anesthesiologist, so if you even think about wanting some sort of pain management you're going to be in a hard place. The only thing I'm prepared for is a complete spinal block in the event that I had to perform a caesarean section, which I know is something you're not hoping for," she replied.

"I'll be fine," stated Cortana.

"You say that now but I don't think you've really experienced pain like this before, you'll find yourself shocked at how painful it truly is," stated Catherine smoothly.

John hadn't thought about this. He'd experienced plenty of painful things, oftentimes refusing sedation because he hated the drowsy side-effects he experienced afterwards. He hadn't thought about the fact that childbirth was notoriously painful.

She shrugged, "Well, I guess I'm going to experience it, no way around it."

Cortana could be exceedingly blunt at times. She was stubborn in a different way from John. The expression 'my way or the highway' came to mind.

Catherine rather suddenly bid them goodnight and went to go change in the second bathroom. She splashed her face with water and sighed. She supposed that the baby had to have gotten there somehow but it was strange to think about. She had assumed that the conception of their child had been an isolated incident-her Spartans should have had little to no sex drive. Surely they would have maybe been able to perform the act but the psychological processes that lead to physical arousal should have proven a challenge.

That wasn't what she had seen. John was very clearly taken with her. Him kissing her wasn't what had made her uncomfortable, kisses could be as exciting as a handshake. No, it was the way he held her, the way he ran his hand through her hair and the tenderness he afforded her. It was the intensity between them that made her uncomfortable. It shouldn't have been possible.

What disturbed her more was what it represented. The way he looked at her was without restraint, he very clearly loved her with everything he was. It was odd. She never could've imagined that he would've been able to transfer his undying sense of duty and service to a woman. Even now, she was a human woman, exceedingly intelligent but, overall, breakable. John shouldn't have been able to love her the way he did. She was missing something-a variable in the equation that she didn't know yet. Even stranger were Cortana's deep feelings for him. She wondered when and how they had evolved in such a way.

Her mind couldn't cease to imagine the possibilities. What if when she had said that her work, the Spartans, were the next step for humanity as a species she had been more right than she'd ever known? This child could change the world just as much as her mother and father had.

This colony was not without its charm. It was a temperate climate, the seasons changed and there were many natural wonders-waterfalls, mountain ranges, springs and rivers, it was nice enough.

She crawled into the bed and stared at the ceiling with thoughts of the unknown playing through her racing mind.

12. Chapter 12

Quick update since the last chapter was short and I have become addicted to reading reviews. Lol, that sounds ridiculous but yeah. I really like this chapter, it makes me happy.

* * *

><p>A few weeks passed and they proceeded to go on with their lives normally, despite a guest and a pregnancy. Kelly was over watching Cortana flip through wedding pamphlets.<p>

"You want to invite a Sanghelli to your wedding?"

Kelly was perplexed.

"On the Halo Campaign John and Thel'Vadam developed a kinship. I wouldn't call them friends but they have profound respect for one another. He is good, he has a great vision for what the galaxy could be. I don't know if it'll be possible but I think it would make for a gesture of good faith. Lord Hood has been to Sanghelios, learning their culture and language, perhaps it would be good for an Elite to attend a human wedding," said Cortana, flipping through a resort catalog.

"What do you think of this room," she questioned.

Kelly was still stuck on the fact that an Elite was being invited to a wedding here. She had killed Elites. She had seen Elites kill UNSC soldiers.

"I don't like it either," said Cortana ignoring Kelly's lack of a response and flipping through another booklet.

Cortana sighed, still seeing that Kelly was shaken by the inclusion of the Arbiter in their wedding planning.

"Look, Kelly, if a Sanghelli at our wedding is going to upset you, take it up with John. He has his reasons and I'm sure he can explain himself better than I could," she huffed.

"That being said, I need you to focus that Spartan brain of yours on helping me make some decisions about this wedding thing-I am determined to do this before I am visibly huge so the clock is ticking. I made an appointment to do the whole 'dress' thing later this afternoon." Cortana sighed. Her belly visibly protruded, she had purchased actual maternity clothes at this point. She was determined to have this wedding before next week was out. She had sent out all four of the invitations, and had yet to buy a dress, a wedding band for John, shoes or really anything. They were going to just go to the resort's restaurant afterward for drinks and celebration, nothing too

organized and everyone could just order food they wanted.

Kelly nodded, she would talk to John later about her qualms with the Sanghelli.

"I think you should have the ceremony outside-Fred and I were married in front of a bunch of strangers in a decorated hanger. You should have it at sunset and I think you should wear ivory, it will compliment your skin and look good in photographs," she said simply.

Cortana thought for a moment. "You're really good at this, have you been sitting home over your summer break watching wedding programs?"

Kelly blushed a little bit. She may or may not indulge in bad programming when she took a bath. And when Fred was gone. And maybe a few other times. She also may have seen a few outer colonies wedding specials.

Cortana started laughing. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone," she winked.

"Is Dr. Halsey coming with us shopping?"

Cortana sighed. "That's a hard one for me. She created me and I am a part of her, she is the closest thing to a mother I will ever know, and yet there are differences between us that are...difficult. I've always felt that she resented me, at least in some capacity. I don't think she would really be interested in clothes shopping. I think she will want to be more involved with anything with the baby but that involves both you and myself and honestly I think she has some issues wrapped up in John having a child with me," rambled Cortana.

"Like what?" questioned Kelly.

Cortana had been feeling slightly uneasy about Catherine's presence. She couldn't help that while she was being taken care of she was being observed more than treated. Little comments here and there, awkward silences where she could tell Catherine's mind was racing. She couldn't help but feel slightly apprehensive.

"I can't really put my finger on it. She makes the mistake of assuming that she and I are exactly the same when my time as an AI and the experiences I had on the Halo Campaign and thereafter changed me-structurally, we have the exact same thought processes, but we don't always arrive at the same conclusions about everything. She has a lot of feelings wrapped up in John particularly. I know that she views him and I as the culmination of her life's work. It bothers me. This baby is a physical manifestation of the relationship John and I have, and that's unnerving for her, and at the same time, she can't help but want to know 'who is the daughter of John-117,'" Cortana paused, "and I have an answer to that question, she's my daughter, the rest is all details."

Kelly had never really thought about the relationship between Dr. Halsey and Cortana and the problems it could present.

"What are the concerns with your pregnancy that you need to be observed so intently?" Kelly had been wanting to know for a long

while but hadn't felt bold enough to ask.

"How far along are you, Kelly?"

"Twenty-one weeks," Kelly glanced down at her stomach that very obviously bulged forward.

Cortana smiled. "Me too,"

Kelly was perplexed. Already, Cortana's stomach was already significantly larger than her's.

"When I found out I was pregnant, I considered the possibility that John's experience on Requiem with the Forerunner Librarian had not only made him immune to composition but incorporated all of his augmentations into his genetic make up. It's only been a hypothesis of mine, but so far it's pretty sound," she laughed.

"So she'll be like a Spartan?" questioned Kelly feeling a little dumbfounded.

"I don't know how much of me there will be and how much of John, but she's already big. We won't really know until she's born but there is potential for her to be strong enough to really hurt me. We couldn't explain this kind of thing to a normal doctor so we went to the only person we knew we could trust," she sighed and ran a hand over her stomach nervously.

Kelly felt scared for her friend. She had read extensively about pregnancy and childbirth when she had decided she wanted to be a mother. Perhaps she would've been able to carry such a strong, large baby easily but Cortana was average in stature.

"You are right to trust Dr. Halsey, you are in the best hands possible," stated Kelly almost as if she were trying to convince herself as well.

Cortana smiled. "I agree with you, I think everything will turn out fine. But I'm getting more and more tired, which is why I want to get this whole wedding thing taken care of, so let's go pick out a dress."

They drove into town, it was a very busy day and it took them a while to find somewhere to park.

Kelly got the stares she was accustomed to and even some waves from students and parents. They took an elevator up to the bridal salon. It was bright, very well lit.

"Hi, my name is Astor, did you have an appointment?"

Cortana shifted on her feet a little.

"Yes, 1500 for Cortana," she felt a little uncomfortable and she didn't really know why, it was just a kind of odd experience.

"Oh I see you right here, I'll be working with you today and this is..?" she gestured to Kelly.

"I'm Kelly," she reached forward and shook the woman's hand.

Strangely enough, the woman didn't gawk at her height too much.

"And are you two friends, sisters?"

"She's going to be my sister-in-law," explained Cortana.

"That's so wonderful that you two get along so well, are we both shopping?"

"No-"

"Yes!" exclaimed Cortana. Kelly looked at her.

"Let John and I get something nice for you," she smiled.

"You really don't have to do that, I have a pension and work," said Kelly softly.

"We know that, we would just like to do something nice for you. Besides, John was an E-9 who had an AI checking finance's systems to make sure he was getting every cent of incentive pay he was entitled to, even the ones you have to apply for which, of course, Spartans just don't do."

She was right. Kelly had hardly even understood that she was being paid for a very long time, she hadn't cared. She most certainly hadn't thought of applying for something as superfluous as incentive pay.

"Okay," she acquiesced.

Cortana smiled brightly.

"Okay, so let's start with the bride, tell me about your wedding," the consultant had a stylus and was taking notes.

"Very very small, less than ten people. We're going to the falls resort and getting married at sunset, then having dinner with our guests. Very simple," emphasized Cortana, looking warily at dresses on display that had sheer cutouts and wire frames.

"Also, I'm four months pregnant," Cortana stood up and pulled her shirt a little tighter.

"Oh my gosh I couldn't really tell with how you were sitting. You're going to want something comfortable. How long until the wedding?"

"Week and a half from today," she said

"Okay, so that's entirely doable, what are you envisioning?"

They proceeded to talk about various dress trends and styles. Cortana was learning very quickly that she didn't like lace or beading, she didn't like puffy skirts. They decided on a very simple design, it would have an empire waist and delicate off the shoulder cap sleeves with a subdued sweetheart neckline. The part she was most excited about was the beautiful ivory silk she had picked out-it was easily the most expensive part of the dress. It felt so soft and light, she'd never experienced something of such high quality really,

besides her ring.

They started taking her measurements.

"If you could add a few inches for good measure around my belly," Cortana suggested.

"You said your wedding was in a week and a half," the seamstress commented.

"Trust me, we're going through a bit of a growth spurt right now, it'll be for the best. If you have to take it in the day before we'll pay for it, I'd just rather account for more," she insisted. The seamstress looked at her like she was a little crazy but Cortana didn't really care.

Kelly was looking through a book of dresses and ideas.

"So do you have anything you'd like to see your future sister-in-law in?"

Cortana thought it was a little odd they were asking her but she supposed that plenty of brides were much more controlling than she was.

"I mean, I want her to like it, but you know what, I want it to be really sexy," Cortana's eyes lit up mischievously.

Kelly raised an eyebrow. "I'm four months pregnant," she said dryly.

"Nothing sexier than a pregnant lady, baby had to get there somehow," teased Cortana. Kelly flushed bright red and gave her a look that screamed 'stop that!' Then her expression softened a bit and Cortana could tell she was deep in thought, she needed a push.

"Come on, you've never worn a sexy dress, just think of how good it would look, I'm sure you'll like it and Fred too," she said smoothly.

She saw Kelly fidget slightly but look over to her. "I don't know, what are you thinking?"

They paged through the booklet together and Cortana was easily more excited about finding Kelly something than her own wedding dress. They came to a section that had dresses made entirely of stretchy, form-fitting fabric ribbons that looked like bandages.

"You would look beyond hot in one of these, you have to wear one of these," Cortana gushed.

"I'm not sure," Kelly said, eyeing the hologram of the dress warily.

"Oh come on, a bio-suit is just as revealing and you practically lived in those."

"Most of the time under armor," argued Kelly.

"I think it'll look really good," Cortana whined. Kelly looked at the

picture and had to admit, the dress was definitely fun, she'd never worn anything like it. It plunged into a deep V in the front and looked like it would hit slightly above her knee. The idea of being sexy seemed like it might be fun, she'd never worn a dress for the express purpose of sex appeal.

"You're paying," she caved. Cortana grinned. Kelly ended up picking a subdued yet sharp cobalt blue, she thought it would go well with the sunset in the evening. It reminded her of Cortana's ring and even the subtle sheen to her hair.

"Shoes for both of us," Cortana picked a soft, plain heel that would be comfortable despite her pregnancy.

Kelly's eyes, however, were drawn to some much bolder shoes. Cortana was absolutely floored when she picked a strappy pair of stilettos.

Cortana's dress would be done tomorrow. Kelly's was in stock and just needed length so she tried it on.

"Do you have those shoes in her size?" questioned Cortana a little urgently, eyes not leaving Kelly.

"Oddly enough we do, let me go find them." She went into a backroom and came back with the shoes.

"I have to say I've never had a pregnant lady buy these," she laughed as she handed them to Kelly who went into the changing room awkwardly. Cortana could tell she felt strangely about the entire affair.

Cortana waited for Kelly to get done changing. It was taking her much longer than she had expected.

"Do you need some help?" Cortana teased.

"I can dress myself, thanks Mom," said Kelly sarcastically. Cortana giggled to herself.

When Kelly finally stepped out from behind the dressing room curtain, Cortana gasped.

She was floored. She knew that Naomi-010 had been colloquially referred to as a Valkyrie. Kelly was surely an Amazon right out of Ancient Greek mythology-she could have been Hippolyta, the queen of all the Amazons-she looked so regal, almost as if she were carved out of marble and every bit the fierce warrior she was while still managing to have a softness that was so entirely Kelly.

The blue fabric and the way it hugged her figure was nothing short of stunning. The consultants in the store stopped what they were working on with other clients to simply look at her. Soon everyone in the boutique was looking. Cortana didn't even see jealousy from other women, just sheer amazement at the 6'10'' pregnant woman and her very presence, she looked so out of place in the most surreal way possible.

Kelly's initial reaction was to feel awkward and even a little timid. She looked at herself in the mirror and her eyes immediately tracked

to her scars. She had never worn anything that showed this much skin. She had some rather gruesome burns that had been treated very haphazardly leaving some scarring up her shoulder and onto one of her arms in addition to her surgical scarring from what seemed like a lifetime ago. She caught herself quickly and stopped her self-critique.

No. I am a Spartan. I am proud of who I am. I am perfect the way I am. I am special and I am different. I will not hide, she thought to herself, standing up even straighter. She took a few strides in the tall shoes. It wasn't as hard as she had thought it would be, in fact it was quite fun.

"You have to wear that. I can't even begin to say how much you need to wear that," said Cortana quietly, still amazed at the transformation a dress could provide.

Even though Kelly was modest, Cortana could tell she was definitely admiring herself in the mirror.

"You look hot. There is absolutely no other way to describe it. I think you're as tall as John in those heels," she commented. "Your legs look like they never end, you're just all leg. Do a twirl," demanded Cortana.

Kelly took a few steps and jokingly spun on her heel. Cortana knew she was joking around but it was yet another moment that the physicality of the Spartan came through-she moved with such grace and precision that her twirl had looked like it could have belonged on any stage. She remembered what it had been like to move like that with John, her own human body felt clumsy in comparison.

"I'm definitely taller than Fred in these, that's fun," she mused, "I need to get more shoes like these," she smoothed her hands from her waist down over her hips, entirely enjoying what the dress did for her silhouette.

Pregnancy had definitely started filling her out in places she'd never really thought of, but she definitely liked the look. "Be honest, has my ass gotten big since I've been pregnant?" she quipped sarcastically as she looked over her shoulder.

"Kelly don't even talk to me about having a big ass, I've got you beat there. If by big you mean your ass is absolutely glorious then, yes, it has gotten glorious since you've been pregnant, along with your boobs," said Cortana smirking.

Kelly laughed.

Cortana quickly paid the bills for both of them and scheduled the fitting of her dress the day before the wedding. She was far more excited for Kelly's ensemble than her own though.

"I have to admit, you were right about the dress," said Kelly smiling with satisfaction.

"_Someone_ is getting lucky on my wedding night and I am _not_ talking about me," she teased.

Kelly swatted at her arm playfully, "stop that," she laughed. Despite

the fact that she was pregnant and had rather frank discussions with Cortana about sex it seemed even stranger to discuss sex now that she was having it. It wasn't shameful or anything it was just something she didn't feel particularly frank about like Cortana seemed to much of the time. Perhaps Cortana was just blunt about most things.

"John and I are meeting at the jewelry store, do you want me to drop you off at your house?"

"No it's fine, I would like to run and we're not far from where I live anyways," she waved as she got out of the car and started casually jogging.

Cortana quickly parked the car and found John waiting for her outside of the store. He looked a little surly and she assumed it was because he didn't want to go into a jewelry store again.

She smiled when she saw him, ran up to him and hugged him. She tiptoed as high as she could to give him a quick kiss.

"What's that for?" he said.

"I haven't really seen you today and I know you're not looking forward to this. We'll be quick, I have a plan of attack," she schemed.

"You always have a plan."

"Yep. So here's how it's going to go. We're going to make a direct shot to the men's section, you're going to pick out something you don't hate and then we're going to tell them to just make a band to match my ring for me. Easy."

"What kind of hardware can we expect from opposing forces?"

"Smoothtalkers and schmoozers, be ready to intimidate, Chief, it's going to be a long haul if we get caught up in there, we're a sitting target, engaged couple and I'm pregnant to boot-they will be aggressive and ready to strike but easily confused, a lot like Brutes," she said seriously.

He cracked a smile at that. They walked into the store. John picked out the most simple gold band he could find very quickly-it was self polishing and a strong alloy so he was satisfied.

Cortana showed her ring and asked for a simple, plain band to match.

"What would you think about some smaller bits of the center stone on the band," asked John quietly.

"Johnâ€¦" she trailed off.

"Your fiance has great taste, I think it'd look superb, it'll clear out the colony for what we have of this gem, I can give you a discount for using the smaller stones," the jeweler spoke quickly and determinedly, Cortana had to admire how much he wanted a commission.

When Cortana saw what it'd look like she sighed a little. John smirked, satisfied with her reaction. He knew she would never ask for anything more elaborate outright but he could tell when she liked something.

"Do that," he said shortly. He tapped his credit chip on the counter before Cortana could even argue.

"We'll be in to pick those up the day before our wedding," he said quickly, clearly trying to leave.

Cortana couldn't help but giggle at how quickly he sped out of the store. The sun had started to set creating shadows amongst the tall buildings of downtown.

"I'm hungry, do you want to go out to dinner?" Cortana asked.

It was something they'd never done, it'd always seemed frivolous and cumbersome.

"Where would we go?"

Cortana pulled out her tablet and asked for restaurants.

"How about there?" she said picking something randomly.

They started walking in the direction of the restaurant. She couldn't help but hold his arm as they walked. It was nice to just walk around with him, to feel his warmth and presence.

The restaurant they walked into was clearly a little fancier than they were dressed so they were seated in the lounge area which was preferable to them anyways.

John read the menu and was amazed at how much thought people could put into food-he had subsisted in the field off of terrible rations and MREs, food wasn't something he put much thought into, it was practical, not for the sake of enjoyment.

"Have I told you how much I love food?" gushed Cortana.

She was very enamored with any experience that involved her senses.

"We should do a sample of everything," she proclaimed.

"That sounds fine to me," he said, slightly relieved about not having to make a concrete decision with so many options.

The waiter came and went through the evening and they really enjoyed their time together. It was fun to have someone bring them food and drinks, take dishes and replace them with different things.

John watched Cortana happily picking at her food when she set down her fork, a shocked look overcoming her face.

"What is it?" John was curious what could have possibly distracted her from the cake she'd been eating.

"I think...I think I felt the baby move," she said excitedly. She

jumped again when she felt the same nudge again but stronger. "John come over here," she exclaimed.

She grabbed his hand and placed it on her stomach. His hand nearly covered her entire belly.

"Wait for it, she'll do it again," she said excitedly. They waited to no avail. John couldn't help but feel the slightest bit disappointed.

Cortana frowned. "She's being stubborn like her daddy, here," she took his hand and pressed firmly into her belly.

Right as John was about to pull his hand away, he felt it, a tiny little hit. His eyes widened.

"Freaky, right?" she laughed.

He didn't speak, just thought. She could move now, or at least he could perceive her moving, who knows how long she had been up to it before this point. It was unsettling-It brought her even more into reality. That being said, it was exciting-she could kick and move around, she could let him know she was there.

"I'm excited to meet her," he said quietly.

They quickly paid their bill and walked to their car in a comfortable silence. They pulled up to their home and got out of the car. As John was about to open the door and head inside, Cortana spoke.

"John?"

He turned to look at her.

"Could we...Could we look up at the stars together for a while?" she asked bashfully as if it was an absurd request.

He took her hand in his own and they went over to the long grass by their home. They laid down and sat there quietly for a few minutes. A warm breeze blew the grass and Cortana couldn't help but sigh.

"I never could have appreciated the vastness and beauty of the world we live in before," she said quietly.

"Me either," he agreed. He had had one moment where he had had perspective-seeing the Milky Way Galaxy from the Ark. That had been amazing and awe-inspiring but mostly motivating. It had been at risk, he had needed to save it.

"It's funny, we spent so long defending mankind and humanity...I didn't really know what humanity meant until fairly recently," she reached over and grabbed John's hand and placed it on her stomach.

The moment stretched on. He felt a slight press against his palm and then a sharp kick. He looked over at Cortana, her eyes were bright with excitement. "Moments like these," she was whispering almost as if she were trying to preserve the moment, "are what make me know that I'm real. That this is all happening. I could have never

imagined my life with you."

John thought about her words. Even though their situations had been different, he could relate to her words. There were very few times he had felt so alive, so present in a single moment. Life had gone by as a blur, an intense, brutal and amazing blur until it had slowed and shifted into this, these moments where he felt every bit the man that John could be.

"What do you think she'll be like?" Cortana whispered.

John didn't answer right away. It was easy for him to ascribe vague qualities to her, tall, strong, tiny, innocent...they all didn't really mean anything unless attributed to a person.

"Perfect. In every way," was the best answer he could give. She would be perfect for them because she was a part of them. She would be perfect because she would be theirs.

She kicked at him again.

Cortana laughed, "Seems like she agrees with her father."

"Have you thought of any names?" Cortana asked.

He really hadn't, it was hard for him to even imagine naming anything-things were what they were, though obviously he wouldn't just call her daughter.

"No," he paused, "Kelly is naming her baby Sam. Samantha for a girl Samuel for a boy."

"What do you think about that?"

John hesitated, "I don't want to name our daughter after someone we knew. It's too much to put on someone. A burden."

"What kind of names do you like?"

"I don't know."

"I like names that have meaning. I want our daughter to be empowered by her name, I want it to mean something to her."

"I'll think on that over the next few weeks," he said.

A meteor streaked quickly across the sky.

"Cortana," he spoke lowly.

"Hmm," she was so relaxed she could almost fall asleep.

"I love you."

He seldom said those words. It seemed unnecessary. He'd rather prove his devotion to her, day in and day out than simply speak words to her. But when he was laying with her under the stars, his hand on her belly with their daughter kicking at his hand, he couldn't help but feel that telling her was right.

She ran her hands over his hand, twining their fingers, "I love you too," she replied simply.

He helped her get up and they quietly walked back inside. John guided Cortana through the darkness-Catherine was already asleep and they didn't want to wake her when John could see in the very low light either way.

Cortana fell asleep right away, a rarity for her. She was truly content.

* * *

><p>Squee. Too much fluff I know but I couldn't resist. Also Kelly it tots wearing Herve Ledger. I couldn't resist, it seems so futuristic and sexy and perfect and Kelly is a goddess among women. #inspiration (lol.) I hope you enjoyed this chapter as much as I do, it makes me happy.<p>

13. Chapter 13

I'm starting to think that I think all of my chapters are fun...I love them all for different reasons, haha! I hope you enjoy!

* * *

><p>The morning of the wedding, Cortana was not feeling well. Her skin itched, she felt like she was going to the bathroom all of the time, her feet felt swollen and awkward.<p>

Kelly, of course, felt fine. Cortana had convinced her to go with her to the salon so she wouldn't be alone.

"I am getting my feet done, my feet are absolutely killing me," groaned Cortana, "I don't know how I'm going to be able to stand for most of the evening."

Kelly had to admit, even though the idea of paying someone to take care of her feet was very strange, it did feel nice. Even though she wasn't feeling half of the discomforts of pregnancy that Cortana was, it was nice to have a little bit of tension released.

"This is so weird, that I'm sitting here with you getting my hair done for a wedding," Cortana mused while the stylist fiddled with various heated instruments.

"I've never done anything like this before," Kelly commented while her hair was brushed and teased.

"Well, there was a minimum you had to spend in the salon to have a wedding here, and it's not like I was going to bring John along," she scoffed.

Cortana was getting her hair trimmed and layered a little bit along with ironed down so it was more sleek than usual, nothing too out of the ordinary just a bit more polished.

When I was an AI I didn't have to worry about flyaways, she thought wryly to herself.

"Is this your natural hair color?" the stylist asked as he trimmed her bangs. Cortana laughed,

"I get that all the time, yes."

"Where are you from, it's absolutely gorgeous!" he exclaimed excitedly.

"Oh, I was born on Reach," she said quietly.

"Gosh that's so far away, what in the world brings you all the way out here?" he took a flat iron to her hair releasing puffs of steam as he did so.

"I was in the UNSC and my fiancée retired from active duty, we wanted somewhere quiet and remote. We've had enough excitement for a lifetime," she sighed.

"I understand, I've lived here my whole life and the war was terrible."

Everyone had memories of war. Everyone had lost someone over these long years. It was an important thing to remember.

"So what did you and your fiancé do for the UNSC? Is that how you met?"

Cortana had grown used to being asked things like this when she got engaged-she didn't go out much, but whenever she did people would look at her left hand and feel compelled to ask her about her entire life. It was a cultural norm that she found bizarre.

"It's a little classified still, but my fiancé is a Spartan, I was a field intelligence specialist assigned to him during the Human-Covenant war," she said mildly.

"Wow, that is insane! A Spartan like, those big dudes in armor?" Cortana started laughing.

"Ladies too," she gestured to the chair next to her where Kelly, who was clearly too large for the chair she was sitting in, was having her hair cut, "my future sister-in-law," she smiled.

"Damn...what in the world is that like?" he asked.

Cortana was amused by how gossipy this hair stylist was. John and Kelly both abhorred small-talk but Cortana found it highly enjoyable.

"Well, we get a lot of stares when we go out, he's over a foot taller than me. You run into silly problems like how they don't really make beds for people who are almost seven feet tall, but I think in the next few years seeing Spartans around will become a little bit more normal, or at least a little less uncommon than it is right now," she shifted uncomfortably in her chair as the baby kicked her ribs. She exhaled sharply and noticed her stylist look at her oddly.

"Sorry, my baby is kicking me," she laughed.

"Oh jeez, I can't even imagine being pregnant, no thank you," he replied.

"Well, life will take you interesting places if you let it."

"So are you excited?"

"About getting married?"

"Of course," he drawled as he sprayed a piece of hair.

She looked at herself in the mirror. She'd never worn make-up before and she'd never had her hair styled. She'd never worn a nice dress and it was an entirely new experience. She found it exciting, but she felt a little weird about it.

"Honestly it's just a detail to me. After you've been through what he and I have been through together, your perception of things changes. Of course I'm happy to marry him, but I think we both would've been equally fine not getting married."

"Well, with just one last detail," he tucked one wayward hair away, "you are done."

She smiled. Her make up was extremely natural looking, nothing obnoxious or overpowering.

"Thank you," she smiled.

She looked over to Kelly who seemed to be having a somewhat uncomfortable experience as her hair was brushed and dried. It was cut a little more modernly with some blunt angles and Cortana thought it looked really amazing. It was teased and curled so it managed to look voluminous and a little messy but still somewhat styled.

She shouldn't be surprised so frequently by the beauty of her friend. She supposed that because it was such an afterthought, such an inconsequential thing when compared to the whole of her as an individual, it often snuck up on her and Kelly was suddenly this radiant Amazon Queen, at least that's what Cortana had taken to referring to her as in her head.

Kelly was smart, kind, brave; it seemed almost trivial to note that she was also beautiful. At times like this it was impossible to ignore. Cortana supposed that all of the Spartan-II soldiers were attractive almost to the point of absurdity-they had been chosen for their exemplary genetics which afforded them not only good health but subsequently rather attractive features. It was almost ironic considering it was so nonessential to their original, extremely specific purpose.

Cortana and Kelly ate a quick lunch in her room. John was off making sure that their Sanghelli guest wasn't experiencing any trouble and waiting for Lasky and his date to show up.

Catherine walked into their room and poured herself some coffee.

"Cortana, how are you feeling?"

"Glad that we're doing this wedding thing before I get any bigger," she said sarcastically, as she popped a strawberry into her mouth.

"God, I want so much food all the time," she murmured dipping some more fruit in chocolate.

"Kelly you look very nice," said Catherine appraisingly as she put on her dress and earrings.

"Nice is the biggest understatement of the year, you look amazing, I'm excited to see if Fred has any reaction but I know that John is going to be so weirded out seeing you in a dress, I can't wait," exclaimed Cortana.

"You are the only woman to ever hope her future husband looks at another woman on her wedding day," Halsey stated dryly.

Cortana snorted. "Please, if there's one thing I know I don't have to worry about is John having a wandering eye. He's pretty into this," she gestured widely at herself, "for some reason."

Kelly couldn't help but laugh. Cortana's way of speaking was so...odd. She could be so self deprecating and at the same time witty and cocky, it was very bizarre.

Catherine helped Cortana into her dress, it was very delicate.

Seeing her in a wedding dress was difficult. She wondered if Miranda might have married. Cortana resembled Miranda very much. It was one of the first things she had noticed about Cortana, though she had simply written it down in her journal and tried to forget about it. She wondered if she would have attended even if she had. Jacob would have been there and perhaps they would have spoken-he was always kind to her in passing even though she knew she had hurt him deeply. Somehow she managed to hurt most things and people she loved. In another life, in another time, perhaps she would have been zipping up the dress of her daughter.

"So then you made your own perfect daughter with that AI of yours, Cortana, a tidy little copy of yourself who thinks you're the Virgin Mary."

The words sprung up on her unexpectedly. Mendez had said that to her at the beginning of his tirade on Onyx, now Trevelyan. Had she created Cortana just to satisfy some sort of sick narcissism? Some demented form of wish fulfilment when she had already had her own daughter who had been wonderful in every way-far too wonderful for the likes of her.

Cortana turned around when she had finished zipping it. Catherine could see herself, could see the ghost of Miranda-a younger, happier, glowing version that couldn't be closer to her in so many mysterious ways.

In a wedding dress.

They could not have been more different in that moment. She had two daughters, both who hadn't taken after her. But who did Cortana take

after? How? Cortana was no copy of herself. It had never been clearer to her than it was in this moment.

She reached and grabbed both of Cortana's hands in her own.

"You look very beautiful Cortana," said Catherine quietly.

She felt a tear stream down her cheek.

Cortana looked at her creator, the closest thing both she and John had ever known to a mother, no matter how screwed up for him that may have been. She was here. She was here taking care of her. She had her worries-worries that the Doctor was simply interested in her child as a science experiment and as some sort of grandiose validation for her transgressions. She could forget about that for just this moment and pretend it wasn't so complicated, pretend that it wasn't so hard for just a little while. It filled her with overwhelming warmth that blossomed throughout her chest.

"Thank you, Catherine."

* * *

><p>John was having a hard time.<p>

"So the purpose of this ceremony is to declare a commitment to one another in front of other people?"

Thel'Vadam had made the trip from Sanghelios to his wedding. He was definitely getting a lot of stares. Parents held their children closer and people glared, it didn't seem to bother him.

"More or less," agreed John.

"I see," he said lowly. "Marriage is more private on Sanghelios. So you are 'marrying' your construct?" this confused him further.

"It's not really like that anymore," he tried to explain but then found himself realizing he didn't fully understand either.

"I am not one to judge," he said quickly. John didn't want to bother trying to explain that it wasn't something weird and never had been.

"You are puny without your armor," he commented. John sighed.

"I'm the tallest person you'll see on this planet," he mused.

"Humans are very tiny."

"Compared to Elites yes, we are smaller in stature," John agreed.

He was happy to have him here, though he was saddened that Linda had declined to attend. She was apparently off on an even less populated planet living communally in meditation. It made sense, she had always been very introspective. She had said that while he was allowed to visit, her own personal journey wouldn't allow her to leave the planet for some time.

He still felt good about his decision to invite the Arbiter. Even though they were not friends, persay, John felt a deep respect for him. He was a force of good in the galaxy and one of his greatest allies.

Kelly had approached him to express her concern, about inviting an Elite to his wedding. He explained the time they spent together, how many times he'd seen him save a human life, his own included.

When he mentioned that he would perhaps be willing to show her a thing or two with an energy sword and perhaps even spar, she had become much more amicable to the idea.

John's pocket buzzed, he was receiving an alert from the front desk that Lasky had checked in. It was about 1600 at this point, the sun would start to set around 1700.

"I'm going to stay here, it is a rather nice sight," the Arbiter said lowly. It was indeed a beautiful garden and waterfall-minerals in the water made it a deep, dark blue with purple plants springing up in the still water. The orange sunset was creating a beautiful scene. John nodded and went to the front desk to see Tom Lasky and, to his surprise, Sarah Palmer. Cortana is going to laugh about this.

He looked at the two of them. She was much shorter without her armor, she was still about an inch taller than Lasky, but she couldn't have been too much over six feet tall. She was wearing a very simple navy dress and flat shoes, her hair pulled back revealing pearl earrings.

"Sir," John said quietly greeting him. Lasky shook his head.

"Please don't do that, it's just too weird," he reached out to shake his hand. Tom had made sure he'd taken leave for this. He felt honored that he was one of very few people invited.

Palmer looked at John a little awkwardly. She didn't really know how to greet him. On one hand, she was a commander, leader of hundreds of Spartans. On the other, he was a legend, a genuine Spartan, one that she wasn't sure anyone could fully live up to.

John raised his hand to shake hers, "John," he introduced sensing her hesitation.

She smirked a little, she really knew nothing about this man and had consistently found herself surprised by him. "Sarah," she replied smoothly and grasped his hand.

She and Tom had been...something, for a few months now but this was the first event they'd attended together. It moved it into the realm of public instead of private and it was exciting but there were definitely some things that took getting used to.

"So you're going to be married, I can't believe it," said Tom as John led them to where they were having the tiny ceremony-there were only six chairs set up.

"Holy motherfucker," Palmer gasped under her breath.

"Hey, Marine," he said, teasing her for her language.

"No I am not fucking joking Tom, look," she turned her head pointedly.

Tom's eyes widened at what he saw. Walking outside towards them was easily the tallest, most muscular woman he'd ever seen in high heels. She was wearing a tight fitted dress. She started laughing as she walked towards John.

"Cortana is going to be angry that she missed your face," she smirked.

"You are wearing a dress," he said shortly.

"Very good observation Chief," the way she said 'Chief' was almost like a nickname with none of the reverence the title usually carried. She punched him on the arm so quickly that Sarah's eyes had a hard time tracking the movement. "I'm almost taller than you now."

Looking at the two of them together, Sarah couldn't help but feel intimidated.

She turned and made eye contact with her.

"Hi, I'm Kelly, John's sister," she reached to shake hands with each of them.

John couldn't help but smile at their facial expressions. They looked completely awestruck. He was a little shocked-he knew that Cortana had something to do with that dress and he couldn't help but find the entire thing amusing. Objectively he could understand that Kelly was a very beautiful woman, the colloquial expression 'knock-out' came to mind looking at the faces of his wedding guests.

"When Kelly and I were little we were on a three-man team together for years," he explained. Sister was the only word that worked for Kelly.

Tom and Sarah still hadn't said anything, they were too shocked. Kelly ignored their reactions.

"Cortana wanted to know when you were coming to get her, she's a very impatient person," Kelly commented.

"I was on my way, I'll go right now."

Sarah watched as he left, another, less severe looking man had been taking a few pictures here and there. Kelly ran over to him and grabbed his hand to go sit down. Dr. Halsey wearing a soft green dress sat down next to them.

That left her and Tom sitting next to the Arbiter. Sarah and Tom both had worked with him and found him to be an incredible ally but it was just a funny picture.

"I was so busy gawking that I'm just now realizing this-she's pregnant," whispered Lasky. Palmer rolled her eyes.

"She can hear you, her hearing is better than mine Tom and I'd hear

your whispers half a mile away," she laughed. As if to confirm, Kelly looked over to them, ran a hand over her stomach, and smiled.

"This is definitely going to be more interesting than we predicted," commented Sarah.

With very little fanfare, Cortana and John walked outside, arm in arm. Cortana looked much like she had as an AI. She looked radiant, her cheeks flushed a rosy red, a soft smile on her face.

They reached the officiant together and after a quick greeting, they went directly into their vows.

"I vow to stand by your side and take care of you. I will do my best to be a good mother to our daughter. You have all of the love and devotion I could possibly give, now and forever."

When John spoke, Tom found himself surprised. He had only seen his face a few times before this occasion he had been going through a dark time. He still looked very somber, very serious to the point of being almost grave as he spoke his vow.

"I promise you everything, forever," was all he said.

Sarah wondered what it would be like to have the arguably most powerful and decorated hero of the galaxy promise everything to you. It was a strange concept, for her to see him so vulnerable to another person.

He leaned in and kissed her with a softness she could've never imagined coming from him, when every part of him looked like it was poised to kill, a perfect instrument of destruction handling a comparatively fragile woman with such tenderness was almost poetic.

They were announced married and the small group of attendees clapped, the Arbiter looking confused about why everyone was hitting their hands together.

Cortana proceeded to jump rather impressively and kiss him. Shocked initially, the Spartan picked her up in his arms and kissed her back.

Sarah started laughing incredulously and whistled loudly.

He set her down and everyone offered their congratulations.

"Well, we have a reservation at the restaurant, food and drinks are on us," Cortana announced. She grabbed John's hand and leaned against him, leading everyone to their small wedding reception.

_Married. This is going to be different somehow, _she thought to herself.

* * *

><p>Didn't really know where to end this, had to divide it up somehow. How you enjoyed it!<p>

14. Chapter 14

Hey all! I think finals turned my brain to mush/goop...I'm having a hard time thinking about anything! Lots of military stuff this chapter...Hope it isn't hard to follow. I'm Air Force so that's most of my background. (For military readers out there, yes I am aware, chair force...lolololol, glad we got that out there). Spartan rank structure and whatnot is pretty vague so I take some liberties. I hope you guys enjoy this! It's a MEGA long chapter-I spoil you guys.

* * *

><p>When they sat down, the Captain took the liberty of buying two bottles of champagne.<p>

"Tom, let us be good hosts," Cortana said. She felt a little odd about someone buying champagne for her and John even if it was their wedding.

"Let us be good guests, you guys need a toast at least," he smiled. He was charismatic and rather charming.

He stood up to make his toast.

"I haven't had the pleasure of knowing either of you on a very personal level, but I can most assuredly say that I can't think of two people who deserve happiness more than the two of you. I'm honored to be here, amongst your family and friends."

They all toasted and started to enjoy their dinners.

"I don't know if I was ever under your command, I served on the Lightbringer for the last five years of my career with fireteam Kronos," said Kelly sipping water.

"No then you weren't, I would've remembered you," Sarah said. She remembered almost all of the Spartans under her command at any given time even though it was a lot. She could recognize faces and she most certainly would have remembered a Spartan-II, her only Spartan-II had been the Chief, however brief that had been.

"Did you have any Spartan class threes?"

"I actually have all of them right now, don't want to split them up," she said. Kelly and Fred's eyes lit up.

"How are they," asked Kelly excitedly.

"They're well, tough as nails with the most grit I've ever seen, they can really bring it."

It was true, she had never seen such fire, such intensity from a group of individuals until she had met the small group of Spartan-IIIs. The look in their eyes was something she had never seen anywhere else, it was raw determination and a very clear vision of what it was like to go to hell and back. It was extremely unnerving but somehow awe-inspiring.

"Spartan Lucy actually just put on E-7 and is my first sergeant. She

does an excellent job and she's a great NCO, she really understands people and has been an invaluable resource," she replied.

Lucy was the tiniest Spartan in history. When she had found out she was getting the last remaining Spartan-IIIs and the potential problems they would present she had done her research.

The absolute shit that Lucy and Tom had been through blew her mind. When she had read the file on Pegasi Delta, it gave her goosebumps. She considered herself pretty tough, she had seen a lot of action, seen plenty of men and women die and put bullets in plenty of Covies, but nothing like Pegasi Delta. She couldn't even fathom what it would be like to watch the only family you had just burn like that, gone right before your eyes.

Lucy didn't speak for seven years after the incident.

When Sarah had read that, she knew that she wanted that woman as her first shirt. She couldn't think of a better person to look out for her Spartans, someone who had been to a hell beyond anything she could reason and made her way back, no matter how long it had taken she had made it back. She'd called her to her office a few days after she had in-processed to Infinity.

"Ma'am, Spartan Lucy-B091 reports as ordered."

She was very soft spoken but not in a timid way, her voice was simply quiet.

"At ease Spartan, have a seat," she gestured at the chair. She did so and looked directly at her. She looked small in the chair that was designed for hulking Spartans.

"How are you finding the Infinity?"

"I have never been on a ship of this magnitude or with this many people, it's amazing, ma'am," she replied stiffly.

"I read that you and the other Spartan class IIIs received Mjolnir training prior to your arrival, are you feeling more competent with the equipment? It's very complex."

She looked down a little awkwardly.

"I haven't been able to train at all, I haven't received my armor and the specification list because there isn't any small enough for me."

Palmer frowned and made a note. "I'll put that on priority, I need you prepared and training with your fireteam."

"I apologize, ma'am."

Palmer chuckled. "What are you apologizing for, being small? You can't help that."

"It's embarrassing for a Spartan," she said quietly.

Palmer looked at her. She had dark, short hair and a delicate face. Pixie, was the word that came to mind when she looked at her. Part of

her still looked like a little girl at 20 years old, but she was no little girl. There was a haunted look about her, a look that Palmer had become very familiar with seeing. Palmer knew one thing for sure-Lucy had nothing to be ashamed of.

"I wanted to discuss your file."

She watched Lucy clench her hands the slightest bit but aside from that she showed no outward reaction.

"I read about what happened to you. I read about Pegasi Delta and your years of silence afterwards."

The sound of the explosion, the factory and the leaking coolant, the smell of burning flesh and the impossibly bright white light, saltwater and panic...It quickly flashed through Lucy's mind with torrential clarity. She must have gone pale because the Commander looked at her.

The Commander was worried that she couldn't handle this. She could be separated from Tom who she had been with for as long as she could remember. The other Spartan-IIIs needed her too-they were her family, she had to look out for them. Maybe she could make her understand.

"It was...truly horrible. I know that people react differently to trauma and it was where my threshold was. Everyone I had ever loved was dead and I felt like I should have been dead too, I couldn't save them," she found herself saying the same words she had said to Prone, words she had never said to another human, even Tom, she was saying to this Commander.

You're not doing a good job convincing her you're fit for duty, pull it together Luce, she coached. But she couldn't, not now that she had started.

"Tom and I were the only survivors and I was in a haze. I couldn't believe what had happened, I had deserved to die that day. I looked up at the hot sky and the ashes around me, the cruelty and hell that had formed around me and asked Tom," she took in a deep breath to master herself but it didn't do much, "I asked him: 'How do we know we're still alive?'"

It was chilling, the hollow tone in her gentle voice when she said those words. How does anyone know what alive is when they've seen so much death? Your own life doesn't even matter at that point.

It was hard not to feel emotion hearing her story. The tiny Spartan before her had seen too much too soon when she had been a kid sent to die. Her parents had been turned to glass long before her Spartan brothers and sisters on that day leaving fractured pieces of her in their wake.

"For some reason those were the last words I spoke for seven years. Something about me was just inexplicably broke, all of my words were taken from me, they had died. I still worked hard to be a good Spartan and I learned to make people understand me but I had just...it was too much for me back then. I'm better now, you don't have to worry about me, I can handle the mission."

It would've been too much for just about anyone, thought Palmer to herself. _And here she is, defending herself to me, begging to come back for more. Amazing._

Palmer felt humbled. True heroes don't always go down in history books-this war had so many casualties-it made her wonder how many others, how many other soldiers, were walking around dead inside like she had. How many had had their very humanity taken from them the way this woman had.

"Did I read correctly that it took Catherine Halsey to push you over the edge to speak again?"

Lucy swallowed nervously-finding words was still difficult at times, especially in a situation like this. She was being so honest about the shame she felt. She wanted her to know she was okay, that she wasn't going to be a problem, she could do this.

The only officers she had known were Kurt and Fred. This woman was more intimidating, more polished than either of them.

You're a Spartan damnit. You aren't afraid of anything. You know hell, you can handle it, you're small but you've got grit. Her inner monologue sounded like Chief Mendez. She missed him right now, she remembered how he had held her when she cried, the closest memory she had of a Father was him even though it saddened her. He had taken care of her from when she was a little girl, he had promised her revenge and made her a strong Spartan-she would not fail him.

"You read correctly ma'am."

"After almost a decade of not speaking, what did that Doctor do to get you to snap like that?"

Lucy couldn't tell what the Commander was looking for, she couldn't tell if she was going to be told off or what.

"Ma'am sheâ€¦" the memory was making her angry when she recalled it, she could feel her hands start to shake with barely controlled fury. "She's a bully, she was harassing myâ€¦" she searched for the right word, "my friend," friend was the right word even if it made her sound crazy, "Prone. She wouldn't leave him alone and he was scared and I could tell he just wanted her to leave him alone."

"Prone to Drift is a Huragok, how could you tell he was scared?"

Lucy shifted a little in the chair. She took in a deep breath.

"I've been scared before. I've known what it feels like to feel helpless and to just want everything to stop, I've known what it's like to not be able to speak. It was just too much seeing her harass him like that, he was innocent," she remembered Prone's shaking and how he had curled his tentacles up towards himself in fear.

We were so similar, Prone and I, she recollected.

Palmer's facial expression softened minutely. She has a lot of heart. She might be tiny but I've never seen this kind of a spirit before.

"I believe you, Spartan. I believe you and that's why I want you to be my first shirt, my right hand, my eyes and ears to the enlisted Spartan corps on this vessel. You know what it's like to be down and out, you've seen the realest hell that anyone could conjure. You know what it's like to fight back even if it's not easy, even when it's an uphill battle."

Lucy's eyes widened. This wasn't what she had expected out of this conversation.

"Ma'am, I -"

"It's a big promotion, First Sergeants have to be at least an E-7 so you'd be hoping a few rungs but I have a feeling you could handle it. What do you say?"

Lucy felt her heart clench. It was a big responsibility and it was important to the whole ship. E-7, she'd be only one pay rate below Chief Mendez.

"I'm happy to serve wherever I'm needed, ma'am."

"Good," she tapped a button and ordered the promotion, "Today's your date of rank, report to me at the beginning of the duty day tomorrow and I will show you to your office. You will still be with your fireteam and running through war games but you will have some additional administrative duties to accomodate. Ideally you will meet with me once a day unless the mission doesn't allow for this. You will be the step on the chain-of-command before me; when an enlisted member needs me they'll go to you first. You will become familiarized with the health and counseling services aboard the Infinity and be able to refer Spartans anonymously to those resources, you will not tell anyone, even myself, who seeks any of these resources. Fireteam leaders will report to you with any problems, anything they need for their Spartans to maintain optimal readiness will go through you. Do you have any questions?"

She felt speechless. She couldn't believe she was getting so much trust, such a big responsibility at her first real duty station. She had done a lot of administrative work on Onyx, or Trevelyan as it was now called thought it had mostly been housekeeping. She had known the duty that first shirts performed but she'd never seen herself as one-she had only been speaking again for a few months.

She smiled softly. It felt amazing to be useful, to be in a position to help others.

"No ma'am, thank you for this opportunity, I won't let you down," she said resolutely. She wouldn't leave any room for error, she was going to do this right, she would serve the Spartans of Infinity and Commander Palmer to the best of her ability.

She got up and did a proper salute and about-face. Right as she was about to leave, the Commander spoke again.

"Spartan?"

Lucy looked over her shoulder. "Yes ma'am?"

"It was about time someone gave that woman a fist full of her own medicine, I wish I could've seen it."

"She doesn't like Spartan-IIIs, she treated us like subpar hardware compared to the IIs, it was annoying and debasing."

Palmer smirked. I'm sure a good punch made her wonder how subpar they were.

"She doesn't like us IVs either kid, welcome to the club."

Lucy smiled the biggest smile she had smiled in a long, long while. She and the Commander were going to be a good team.

Sarah, being a work-a-holic, was receiving a consistent stream of messages from Lucy throughout the whole day just to assure her that things were going well. She was glad she had someone she could trust so much.

"First shirt, that's really amazing for her," said Kelly happily. "You must be a good leader to see potential like that, that's the most important part of being a leader is having a vision for what you could achieve," she said kindly. Sarah felt a little overwhelmed at the Spartan-II's praise. She took a sip of her drink awkwardly.

"I do the best I can for the people I serve, I expect their best so they deserve my best," she said trying to sound humble.

"That's a good way to look at leadership, leadership is servitude in many ways," agreed Fred.

"Fred and I received an invite to visit Reach and observe the new Spartan training programs, we were thinking of making the trip before the baby comes, what was your experience like?"

Sarah felt that she couldn't even begin to talk about her Spartan training-it would pale in comparison to what they had went through even though it had been the hardest thing she'd ever done.

"Lots of team building. PT isn't as big of a concern because there is a rigorous screening process before you can even enter the indoc phase, there is a lot after the surgeries to get used to the different capabilities and a lot of emphasis on Mjolnir," she said calmly.

Kelly laughed a little bit, "John was the first to ever successfully wear Mjolnir armor-we were all so jealous when we saw him, it was probably the only time in his life he was faster than me," she ribbed. John shook his head a little bit exasperatedly, "The best part, Catherine is trying to tell him 'relax Chief, be very relaxed,' the XO moves to leave, John snaps to a salute and nearly bashes his own head in, Sam teased you for days about that," she smiled warmly.

"How could I forget about that," he commented dryly.

"I'll have to remind you more often," joked Kelly.

Sarah couldn't believe how casual this Kelly was and how absolutely silent her appeared to be husband was. He looked so much more normal

than John or Kelly, his mannerisms much less forward, he was taking pictures of the whole event. She tried to ignore the Doctor as much as she could-she wasn't a fan in any sense of the word and it was hard to be in a room with someone you'd once attempted to kill. She could tell by a few subtle, cold glances that the feeling was mutual.

"Arbiter, you should know that Kelly is the best human I've ever seen wield an energy sword," John said quietly.

The Sanghelli looked to her, very clearly sizing her up.

"Yes, I remember you telling me about this, this is something I would like to see," he commented, clearly amused.

"You can't fight with energy swords, you're pregnant," said Catherine, a little perplexed.

"Do not worry, I have brought equipment that makes for practice-when you go in for a kill, it deactivates the sword instantly, otherwise we would have far less of us were this not so," he mused.

"If you're nervous Kelly I would understand, Thel'Vadam is the best of his people," John goaded.

Kelly glared, that was a cheap blow. There was no way she could resist a challenge, he knew that because it was also in his nature.

"Tomorrow morning then," Kelly stated picking at wedding cake.

Cortana rested her hand on John's leg underneath the table and absent mindedly drew circles. She was getting tired and it wasn't even that late. She smiled softly. Even though a wedding had been just a detail, it had been a nice experience. It made her feel more prepared to welcome a child into their home.

Everyone continued to chat amicably. Dr. Halsey was very quiet but seemed as content as she ever did.

"So how is the UNSC?" questioned Fred, speaking for perhaps the first time that evening.

"Honestly things are a little boring right now, not that we're complaining. We're working on transitioning our force and numbers to reflect times of peace, our missions are all changing, people are getting out and taking leave to their families for the first time in years," Lasky smiled. "It's a good time."

"Speak for yourself, I've been dealing with an absolute shit storm which isn't really anyone's fault except for NavSpecWepCOM mandating all of these inspections because of ONI's budget directives," sighed Palmer, taking a large sip of her wine. "I can't tell you much but at least Tom here is much nicer to work with than Del Rio, I've had a drink or two and let me tell you he's the biggest fucking POG I've ever worked for."

John started laughing. It was the frankest, crudest and most accurate assessment he'd heard to describe a commanding officer. John also

really didn't like the man even though he usually made a point of not forming personal opinions on the people he worked with.

"See look even he agrees with me, I bet you can smell a POG a mile away," she found it easier to address him more directly with a drink or two in her system, easier to address him like a normal person because it was still entirely too surreal.

"I know you Navy guys like to think you're all a big class act but he asked me to arrest the Master Chief, can we talk about how ridiculous that is? Had he been anyone other than the commanding officer of the Infinity I probably would have laughed and told him to fuck off. I'm sure if he hadn't gotten transferred he would've tried to give me a Letter of Reprimand or a disorderly but shit," she paused and finished her drink, "I was not getting in between you," she gestured at John, "and her," she gestured at Cortana.

"I don't think any of us were really having a good day that day," said Cortana recalling her rampancy very clearly.

"Okay I'm not going to deny that my predecessor may have been a little bit of a jerk but you're calling him a POG? You're an officer and a Spartan, you've come to the POG side, you can hardly call a Spartan a grunt you guys get everything," provoked Tom. He liked to see if he could get a rise out of her and it was easier when they were off duty.

"I paid my dues as a ground-pounding grunt even before I became an ODSF which is probably the shitiest, roughest gig in the UNSC, drop me in armor with a bunch of Covies nowadays and I've got you covered but when I was an ODSF that shit was terrifying," she sighed, "Look, having experienced both, I would much rather drop in armor with re-enforced bone structure than in a glorified coffin that malfunctions half of the time with a bunch of friggin Zealots running at you with energy swords, shit is ridiculous," she shook her head.

"Well us mere mortals manage somehow."

John had never thought about it that way. He had seen the terrified looks on the marine's faces when fighting Covenant and had felt an urge to cover for them whenever he could-he had never really felt fear when on the battlefield, it was an emotion he had never made time for, it was hardly mission essential. He was sure that Palmer's experience, her experience of having 'both sides' benefited her in some ways-she was more able to lead in the UNSC than he was able to, she could relate to the common fears and struggles of the grunt. Even things like military slang, POG, person other than grunt, were colloquialisms he just didn't think in terms of. He felt like he could respect her more as a Spartan and leader hearing her speak of her experience-it was unique. The Spartan branch was unique, he thought it was a very good program.

Palmer looked from the Chief to Cortana. She was clearly starting to look tired. She couldn't even imagine herself as a mother let alone these other Spartans as parents.

"How are you feeling?" Sarah overheard John speaking quietly to Cortana.

"I'm okay, just getting sleepy. My feet hurt, I really shouldn't have worn heels even though they're supposed to be very comfortable ones. I'll probably put you to use later,"

"I don't mind," he spoke even lower. Sarah had to strain to hear over Tom speaking to Fred and Kelly about command structure, Christ he was such a square. Probably why she liked him so much. She refocused her attention on eavesdropping.

"Really? I can think of other things for you to do besides rub my feet," Sarah was trying so hard to make it appear that she was involved in another conversation, adding tiny things when she could but this was too much, she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"What's your plan, I could use some intel."

No. Way. Out of context he sounded how he had normally sounded, very serious and practical but in the context her mind was blown. The Master Chief was somehow, some way, a flirt.

"First you're going to carry me up to our room because I don't feel like walking," out of the corner of her eye she watched as Cortana ran her hand from his shoulder to underneath the table. Sarah saw an almost imperceptible change on his face. Holy shit she's touching him under the table. This is so beyond weird, I want to stop listening but I can't. "According to my sources, our room is equipped with a sizable jacuzzi, I think our best course of action would be to utilize it to our best advantage, after that we're flying blind."

"I have a few more ideas," he said calmly. Cortana smirked a little bit.

"What, you plan on shooting your way out again?" she giggled, clearly something of an inside joke.

"Not this time."

Sarah saw a red flush creep up Cortana's neck and she made a noise that was rather inappropriate for public. The whole table turned to look at her. She started turning a brighter shade of red and shook her head quickly.

"I'm fine, baby just kicked me weird," she laughed nervously, "I think we're going to go to bed, I'm really exhausted, eat and drink as late as you want, it's on us, we'll see you in the morning," she got up and grabbed John's hand. It was a very strange sight to see such a small woman drag the nearly seven foot tall Spartan out of the restaurant, when they very clearly thought they were out of sight of their guests, they saw him scoop her up and carry her up the stairs, Cortana yelping indignantly "John!" laughing loudly and kicking her legs.

The entire table sat silently for a moment.

"I wish my baby would kick me like that," said Kelly dryly.

Dr. Halsey was the first to cover her mouth and start laughing. She continued to laugh until she was in tears. She had very clearly reached her breaking point with this whole affair, she looked a

little neurotic. She excused herself to go to bed, saying goodnight to Fred and Kelly without even acknowledging Tom or Sarah.

_Bitch probably has plenty of issues concerning this whole affair, _thought Sarah.

"Well, I may have married brass," she elbowed Fred, "but I was enlisted and the Chief is paying, so I say we get a round in honor of our newlyweds," she tapped the table and she ordered mixed drinks for the table and orange juice for herself.

The Arbiter quickly excused himself, saying that he would "See the Spartan in the morning."

This left Tom, Sarah, Kelly and Fred sitting at their table.

Kelly continued to ask Lasky and Palmer questions about their relationship to "her brother."

"Well, I met him first on the Infinity and because I commanded all the Spartans on the Infinity I was technically his last commanding officer, though that never really worked out I still ended up with a lot of nice things like his discharge and retirement paperwork so I felt like I really got to know him," spoke Sarah a little sarcastically.

"I wouldn't wish that stuff on anyone, I didn't realize how much a commission really just brought paperwork in addition to leadership," said Fred.

"Thank you, I personally think it's a bunch of bullshit, give me a weapon anytime any day but in times of peace soldiers, even Spartans, get up to no good, alcohol I'm telling you," she chuckled, "So many LoCs, I had a guy who got drunk and accidentally pulled a door off of its hinges, that was fun to deal with."

"The NCO life is the best place to be, I don't need any of that brass crap," laughed Kelly. "We got married a day after I got out so we didn't have any unfortunate frat law violations but I have to say I wouldn't have commissioned for you sweetheart," Kelly teased.

"I would have understood completely."

"I met not only the Chief but both of you one time before when I was very young, on Circinius IV," he spoke quietly.

Kelly and Fred both thought for a long moment.

"I remember that now," said Fred quietly.

"That was...that was a terrible, dark day," Kelly murmured.

"It was. I don't know if the Chief has made the connection but that day...what he did for me that day, it made me the officer and man I am today," he said quietly.

Sarah was confused. "I knew you were at the attack on Circinius IV but you never spoke of the details."

"The Chief was the reason I survived that day, he saved me and my

squadmates, we were the only three who survived," Lasky spoke gravely.

"John said the only reason that any of you survived was you," spoke Fred softly.

"He would paint it that way," said Lasky feeling a little embarrassed.

"You should be proud of that day, you were a true soldier," said Kelly looking directly at him.

"Tom...what happened?" Sarah couldn't help but feel worried about how clearly affecting the memory was.

"My squad and I were trapped and I sent out a signal, the Chief heard it and busted in, saved us from an Elite who'd killed two of us already," he shook his head, "we were a bunch of shell-shocked kids and he gave us weapons to fight our way out with him. I'll never forget what it was like, seeing him run and shoot with two weapons, fighting our way to the evac point" he sighed. For the first time in a long time, he really remembered watching Chyler die, he remembered her dog tags in his pocket constantly but the actual moment she died was often buried underneath the tasks of the day. He had grown up in that moment.

"I never forgot your faces, I remembered them through my career, when I wanted to give up. You looked...You were so young, not much older than me and yet I knew that you had been feeling the way I had felt, after holding someone as they died, for a long while. And yet, you all seemed so invincible to me, I felt that if I could've been a fraction as strong I could've made a difference in the war."

Kelly looked at him and nodded slightly, clearly deep in thought. She sighed. "That was...that marked a very dark time for myself and for John, that attack was almost directly after we lost our squadmate and brother Samuel in one of the first Covenant attacks of the war. The loss of any of Spartan was painful, but losing Sam changed the both of us forever, a feeling I'm sure you understand," Lasky nodded understanding completely what she meant, about a particular death changing someone forever.

"Battle after battle we were stripped apart. We were clinging onto what we were taught to be, we were Spartans. We were the chosen saviors of humanity, the very best, it was our duty. The reality that we were what was standing between the human race and total destruction weighed heavily upon us. We knew that failure was a possibility. Seeing the only family you've ever known dying around you ...knowing that you would be happy to die for our cause, die along with your brothers and sisters because Spartans never truly die, but at the same time fighting with everything you had," Kelly chuckled darkly, "that is what loss is, that is what darkness is. The fighting with the Covenant remnant was comparatively fun."

"John is...he and Cortana are lucky to have what they have. Fred and I have worked very hard for the happiness we have achieved. Civilian life has not been easy," she said seriously.

"Your honesty is refreshing, many veterans have the same problems you're talking about. Now that we move into peacetime we are having

the same problem we've had for hundreds of years, placing our members into civilian lives that they can function. Suicide rates are higher now than they ever were during the war, people don't know what to do with themselves at this point," Sarah thought about the papers upon papers she would see on Tom's desk. They hardly processed anything with paper anymore, but suicides were the exception.

"At times, it is hard to look to tomorrow when not so long ago, tomorrow was taken away," Fred said quietly, "but now we have tomorrow."

"Our situation has been unique because we have been consistently viewed as soldiers, not real people. I'm a schoolteacher now and there was initially a lot of contention from parents, they thought I would be too severe with their small children when for a long time, children were the only people I was comfortable around because adults would shy away from the both of us. It got much better after we found John and Cortana. Cortana is the most unique individual I have ever met," Kelly smiled.

"Unique is perhaps the best way to describe it. They have a very interesting relationship," said Tom, sipping on his beer.

"If you listen to them talk about the other one, it's interesting. I don't know if two people have ever known each other as well as they know each other. She has changed John." Kelly said smiling.

"In what way?" Lasky couldn't help but ask. The opportunity to hear about the Master Chief as a person was too tempting.

"John has always been...very grave. Very stoic, extremely serious. To give you a point of comparison, I was perhaps considered one of the most eccentric Spartans in our class, wouldn't you agree Fred?"

He smiled softly, "Yes, you used to fidget a lot."

Sarah and Tom still found Kelly very reserved and stoic, to some degree, so it was interesting to hear that she was "the most eccentric."

She rolled her eyes. "Anyways, John used to be a lone wolf and not a very good leader until Sam, him and myself started working together. Even still, when I had last seen John, before the fall of Reach, I could've never imagined him as he is today. Cortana and he are very similar in some ways-they are both the most impossibly stubborn people I have ever met and the most selfless people I have ever met. When I had heard about what he did, abandoning the UNSC and I saw him, I had to know why he did it," Kelly paused, "but now I understand she is special, it's the only way to describe her. When you spend time with her you learn that, she is a dear friend to me."

"As a Spartan-IV, it was very weird to meet the Master Chief. I had all of these ideas about what he would be like and almost every single one of them was wrong. He was stronger, braver and faster than I imagined. He was also so much more of a person than I could've ever imagined, instead of just a legend talked about during indoc," she chuckled. "I never was able to understand why he put everything on the line for her, why he would subvert order and discipline for an AI but clearly he knew there was something more."

"He loves her very dearly," agreed Kelly. She spoke similarly to John, using facts and logical reason. Things always were what they were with very little embellishment. She sighed and ran a hand over her abdomen. "I'm tired, I'm starting to need more sleep at night, it was nice speaking with the both of you. If John considers you friends then you are friends of us," Fred nodded as he stood up, grabbing his wife's hand.

Sarah was silent until they had both left.

"So this has been one of the most interesting evenings of my life," she said dryly.

"You know, I didn't really know what to expect so I can't say I expected something else, but I'd have to agree, this was all pretty weird," agreed Tom. They walked up to their room. They had gotten something really nice, Tom hadn't taken shore leave in recent memory and Sarah had barely been able to get her leave approved.

He changed into his pajamas while Sarah washed up. He thought about his last day on Circinius IV. He hadn't talked to Sully or Orenski in years-for all he knew they could be gone.

Sarah sat down by him, her body still wet from her shower.

"What happened, that day?" she asked softly. She'd never seen that look in his eye, a somewhat hopeless, sad look that war-weary soldiers often acquired. He had hid it well.

"You know about my cytoprethaline allergy," he said. She touched the blisters and scars on his chest.

"Mhmm."

"That day I was served papers I could've signed to get out of the UNSC. I was probably going to do it. I...I went and talked to my squadmate, Chyler about it. She was similar to me in that we had both lost people we'd loved, different in she had this fire about her, about the UNSC. She grew up on Cygnus around extreme amounts of Insurrectionist violence and she channeled all of her energy and hatred into school whereas I dealt with the loss of my brother and even the absence of my mother by questioning the military as a whole. Anyways, sheâ€¦" he paused, remembering the day and the moment specifically, "she told me she would miss me, and then we kissed." He had had kisses before that, but they were of the playground truth or dare variety, she was his first real kiss.

Sarah nodded, imagining a young Thomas Lasky having his first kiss.

"That's when the sirens went off," he said quietly. "We didn't know what was going on and before we knew it ODS'Ts were dropping and everyone around us was dying. I'd never seen combat, I'd never seen someone die and all of a sudden my instructors and peers were falling around me. My squad ran to the artillery but didn't have codes to access live rounds. I sent out a signal hoping for someone, anyone, to come find us. We waited in fear to be killed. One of us was. Right when I thought we were all going to die, the Chief was there," he shook his head incredulously, "I've never held any religious

convictions, but if God had a face, it was the face of Spartan-117," he chuckled a little.

"He told us that we were the only survivors on the planet and he proceeded to tear through Covenant fire so we could get on a warthog. It seemed like we were all going to make it until a plasma grenade detonated beneath our warthog and wrecked it. A pair of Hunters showed up and no one had seen Hunters before, even the Chief was shocked," he stopped, taking a moment, "I didn't realize it until she started screaming that she'd been hit by a needler. The Chief went to go take on one of the Hunters while we carried her away. She couldn't move and we gave up, laying her on the ground. Sheâ€¦" his voice wavered a little, "she smiled at me, told me it was going to be okay and that she was sorry. Sorry for dying on me. All I could do was say no over and over again. She tore off her dog tags and gave them to me, then she died," he said plainly.

Sarah grabbed his hand and he continued.

"The Chief came back and told us he'd unloaded all his ammo in the first Hunter and needed everything we had. All we had were stun rounds except the grenade I'd been carrying. I handed it to him, I felt so numb. My squad went ahead following the Chief. I looked at Chyler one more time. It was the strangest moment in my life, I grew up in that moment, looking at my dead friend. I caught up with my group and the Chief was about to go take on the Hunter with just a grenade, it was looking very grim. He told us to head to the pelican, no matter what happened to him. I had formulated a plan that he would've never suggested though, I told him I'd run out as a decoy and he could sweep from behind."

Sarah's eyes widened. She couldn't imagine it, running in front of a Hunter, unarmed, ready to die.

"I did it, it shot near me and I flew back a few feet. Right as I was most assuredly going to die, the Chief jumped on the thing's back and shoved a grenade into it and jumped back before it detonated," he shook his head.

"That's absolutely insane, I've never killed one of those fuckers without unloading a few clips," she said in awe.

He nodded. "I thought I was dead when my two squadmates were shaking me to wake up. We were close to the evac point. A Spartan who I now recognize as Kelly ran up and talked to John but everything seemed like a blur. Sitting in that pelican as the planet was glassed, across from three, what had appeared to be robots, having just watched my closest friend die, I couldn't feel anything. Two of the Spartans took off their helmets, 087 and 104, Kelly and Fred. They looked at us, so young, couldn't have been but five years older than us. They were so proud and so scarred, so ruined but so perfect in a moment. They nodded at us, as if to say they understood what we were feeling, that it wasn't going to get any better or easier and that was just reality in that moment. John didn't take off his helmet, but he handed me a piece of the grenade that killed the hunter and told me 'good job soldier.' That moment is what has carried me through my entire career," He reached into his bag and pulled out Chyler's dog tags and the piece of grenade.

Sarah looked at it closely, feeling in awe. This was a piece of his

past, a tangible representation of his journey as a soldier and a person. The story truly summed up everything about him-his intellect, his loyalty, and most of all his bravery.

"That's nothing short of amazing. You were so brave," she said. He blushed.

"I don't remember it that way. Like I said, I don't know if John has made that connection, but he is what inspired my entire career in the UNSC as an officer, everything I've stood for. It was a life changing event."

"But it's no wonder you two have enough of a connection for him to invite you to his wedding, you notice there were six of us there, one a Sanghelli, another a woman who abducted him, his sister, her husband and us? You're a pretty special guy," she kissed him softly.

He laughed. "It sounds ridiculous when you say it that way."

"Can we please talk about how ridiculous this whole evening has been? Can we start with the fact that we saw the Master Chief Sierra-117 get married? Okay, so there's that, then we saw his sister/squadmate wearing four inch stilettos while pregnant in perhaps the sexiest dress I have ever seen. I mean shit, she is hot. You can even agree and I won't be mad, I'll admit it and I'm not even into ladies," she said.

Tom couldn't help but laugh.

"I'm so serious right now, I didn't know being a supermodel was a thing for Spartan-IIs, she should reconsider the whole teacher thing, but that leads to my second point. Can we talk about how both of them are pregnant? I thought they were all a bunch of prudes when in fact they're sex fiends who don't know how to use birth control. I don't think you heard the things they were whispering to each other before they practically ran away to rip each others clothes off. Let me tell you, it was pretty entertaining, the Master Chief has got serious game. He must've been watching soap operas on his HUD during downtime or something. Either that or he and Cortana spent the entire Halo Campaign talking dirty to each other," she said wryly.

"That mouth of yours, when you're off duty I always remember that you were a Marine," he chuckled.

"Semper Fi, We are ODST, all of that. Gotta talk the talk."

He leaned in and kissed her softly.

"I'm ready to sleep, it's been a long day," she said when they broke apart. He nodded and turned off the lights, enjoying the feeling of sharing a real, large bed with her. She ran her feet on his legs under the blankets.

"Your feet are so cold," he commented. She wrapped her arms around him and squeezed him.

"You're so warm and cuddly," she teased, just to annoy him with her cold feet.

He couldn't help but laugh. He liked being able to relax with her. He loved working with her, she was an amazing, efficient, powerful leader. He also liked being able to see her with her hair down and out of her bio-suit.

Right before Sarah was about to fall asleep, he spoke up.

"Sarah?"

"Hmm?"

"Today made me think...maybe happy endings do happen," he spoke softly. He could never have foreseen an end to the fighting, the war, the daily grind that had been his entire life.

Sarah turned his face to her and she kissed him slowly.

"Don't be such a sissy," she whispered. She kissed him again. He knew that was her way of agreeing. She was too hard, too tough to talk about the happy ending she envisioned someday. Too dedicated, she was a Spartan, her definition of a happy ending could've been dying in the name of Earth. But still, he couldn't help but feel that for the first time in a long time they had tomorrow.

* * *

><p>Real talk, I love Palmer and Lasky, I ship them so hard it's pathetic. There will be more of them much later in the story...Til next time!<p>

15. Chapter 15

Cortana pulled herself out of bed and grumpily grabbed herself a traveling mug of coffee.

"I will come back to you bed, we will be together forever," she groaned dramatically.

John sighed. He knew she wouldn't want to miss this but she was not a morning person.

She dragged her feet, following him downstairs to the outside pavilion where they were meeting Kelly.

John could see Kelly and Fred running in the distance, about a half mile away. He heard Kelly yell: "Bet you can't beat a pregnant lady a half mile," and she exploded into a full sprint, Fred trailing behind.

"If only I had half the energy she does," Cortana sighed as Kelly pulled to a stop on the beach.

"It's not fair when you give yourself a head start like that," Fred said, the most exasperated Cortana really ever saw him.

"You're just a sore loser," she took her bun down and shook her head. She started braiding it and looked to John. "When is our Sanghelli friend showing up?" she said the words rather sarcastically but not

enough to sound completely irreverent.

As if on cue, the Elite appeared, his feet leaving odd prints in the sand.

He took out the handle of what Cortana knew to be an energy sword and unceremoniously tossed it at Kelly, she moved to catch it so quickly Cortana couldn't see her hand but for a blur.

She turned it on and it buzzed to life, but instead of blue it was purple.

"I have added a chip here," he pointed on the end of his own, "that makes it safe to train with."

At this point Tom and Sarah had wandered down to the pavillion.

"I can't believe we are going to see a pregnant woman battle an Elite with an energy sword, this has to be a first," Sarah said quietly.

"This is a big deal. The energy sword is not only the most sacred weapon of the Sanghelli but is only taught and learned by the aristocratic class of warriors-Elites who learn the sword may not marry but are encouraged to reproduce with any female they choose to pass on their 'sword genes,'" said Cortana smartly, "For him to even show Kelly anything would be considered rather heretical, but I don't really think he cares at this point considering he's already been branded in front of his people as such."

They walked over to stand by John and Cortana. Cortana looked very grumpy with the entire situation. She was very clearly not a morning person.

"Now, come at me and I will assess your technique," he said activating his own weapon.

Tom couldn't believe what he saw, or rather what he didn't see. Kelly moved so quickly that she was just a blur. Sarah had never seen someone move so quickly out of armor.

"Can you even make sense of those movements?" questioned Tom incredulously to Sarah.

"Yes," she said, "not extremely well but yeah."

"No one touches Kelly unless she wants them to, it doesn't matter if you can see her, you can't stop her," said John quietly.

"Seeing in Spartan time never really helped when we were young, it just made it so you could see her hit you even if you couldn't prevent it," agreed Fred.

"Spartan time?" questioned Sarah, feeling a little ignorant.

"My Spartans have reaction times faster than any other Spartan class, they can slow actions down or speed them up in their minds. As teenagers they dubbed this ability 'seeing in Spartan time,'" said Halsey as she sat down next to Cortana.

The Arbiter, with a growl had his sword pointed at Kelly's throat. She looked composed yet quite wrathful.

"Again," the Elite said lowly. She smirked.

The two combatants were nothing short of amazing. Kelly didn't even seem winded as she bent and twirled. In a split second she jumped high over the Elite's head, pushing off of his shoulder as she jumped. She twisted in the air and as she landed behind him swept the sword across his throat. The blade shut off.

The Arbiter took a step away from Kelly and looked at her. He bowed his head slightly in respect.

"You are assuredly the most capable human I have ever seen wield the most sacred weapon of my people, she-demon. Were you a Sanghelli you would be trained for greatness. As a human there are certain anatomical differences that make the traditional way of fighting impractical to you"

"John was right to say that you are the best of your people, I now understand why you have earned his respect," she moved to hand the weapon back to him.

"No, you may keep it as a gift. Perhaps we will be able to battle again and I would have more time to teach you, in the meantime you should practice," he said lowly, "I must depart, Spartan, I have a gift for you and your bride." He said the word bride awkwardly, his four jaws clicking together and overemphasizing the hard syllable. He handed John a pouch and gestured for him to look inside. He pulled out what appeared to be a very strange ball with a tiny loop. It was rather heavy for its size. It was a pearly white color and shined all different colors when it was in the light.

"That is for young ones, when it is shaken it creates a soothing sound so they will cease wailing, I give it to you in hopes that I shall never need it."

John shook it and he didn't hear anything. Cortana looked at the Sanghelli a little confusedly.

"You can only hear it if you heard it when you were little. I can still hear it because that one was mine."

Cortana was a little skeptical but she nodded. "Thank you very much for coming, Thel'Vadam. It has been an honor," she smiled.

He nodded a farewell to them and told Lasky that they would "Cross paths within the year." He took his leave.

"We have a gift," said Tom. They walked up the steps to a pavilion where breakfast had been laid out for them. Cortana immediately went to get herself some coffee.

Tom pulled out a chip and handed it to Cortana. "Hmm, what have we here," she asked, tapping the chip so the data would expand outward.

Cortana scanned the data and her eyes widened. "What is this?"

"The service record of Lieutenant Commander Cortana Halsey," he said, smiling brightly. Sarah loved how excited he got about these kind of things, he was just too damn nice.

"No way," she breathed. "John, look, it has everything, every mission, everything we did together, even our first training exercise. It says I graduated from MIT?"

"That's my gift," Halsey produced a frame that had a diploma that had her 'name' on it. "I showed them the work you've done on slipstream space, pulled some strings and made it look like you commissioned through the ROTC program."

"This is beyond words, Tom I have no idea how you arranged this, it means a lot," she said softly.

"You deserve the recognition for work you've done, most people realize that. It is to the advantage of the UNSC to have a cover story for you anyways, you know a lot of classified information, it's better to create an official story like this. I just helped facilitate it a little."

Sarah huffed, "A little, more like you spent weeks working on this, don't be so modest."

He smiled bashfully. "We also got you a boring gift, it's a set of glassware, it'll be at your house when you get back."

Cortana looked at the Commander before her. He was easily one of the nicest people she'd ever met. He'd treated her like a real person when she had been an AI, he had shown unwavering loyalty to the greater good. He was a good man.

"Sarah and I are probably going to head out, we've been cut orders to Earth and we have a lot of out-processing to do," he smiled.

They must really moving up in rank and capability, Earth was a prestigious assignment for anyone, thought Cortana.

"Thank you so much for coming and for everything," she hugged him tightly and, rather surprisingly, hugged Sarah just as enthusiastically. It was kind of her to come so he hadn't felt awkward.

John stood and shook Tom's hand. "Best of luck to you both," he said calmly.

Sarah couldn't help but feel so small, so out of place next to the other Spartans. She walked to Fred and Kelly.

"Thank you both for your words yesterday evening and for your service to the UNSC. I hope that as a leader of the Spartans that we will not tarnish your legacy," she looked to John and he nodded. She very deliberately avoided Dr. Halsey, already knowing her opinion of her.

After they had left, Fred, Catherine and Kelly followed suit saying that they would see them when they returned from their trip.

John looked to Cortana. "What would you like to do?"

A calm quiet settled over them with their guests gone. They were alone and got to enjoy time together, it was how things were supposed to be as nice as friends could be.

She looked up at him and smiled. "Could we just lay on the beach in the sun all day?"

"If that's what you'd like."

They went up to their room and Cortana changed into her bathing suit. It was simple and black. The only thing she had been concerned with was the underwire support for her growing chest, she was tired of feeling like she was constantly spilling out of everything she wore. She had a pair of sunglasses that she considered rather stylish, though somewhat old fashioned. She packed a quick bag of lotions, water, a big blanket and towels.

John wore a sleeveless shirt with his swimsuit as they walked to the resort's beach. The sand was bright white and the water a deep blue. The sun shone brightly and Cortana sighed as she laid down their blanket.

She started putting lotion on herself so her skin wouldn't burn to a crisp.

"John, can you get my back?" she asked handing him the lotion. She sighed as he very deliberately massaged the lotion into her shoulders.

"That is just the best," she praised. "In fact, I can't believe how nice this is, warm sun, sandy beach," she stretched and closed her eyes. She listened to the waves rush up against the shore and found it so relaxing she fell asleep for a few hours.

While Cortana slept, he observed all of the people at the beach. There were families and other couples. He watched the families with small children, how they ran about and played without a care in the world. They were so small and so in need of protection. He watched as one tripped and fell in the sand and burst into tears, crying out for his mother. He didn't know how he was going to deal with needless tears and illogical demands. He tried to think of it simply as another mission but it was different somehow. He needed to take care of Cortana, make sure she was safe and happy. He knew how to do those things because he knew her better than he knew himself. How was he to do that for a tiny baby?

He saw Cortana stir. He got up and brought her back an icy drink he knew she enjoyed. She was squinting at the sun when he came back and sat down by her, adjusting to the sun still as he handed her the drink.

She sat up excitedly and he watched her lips as she sipped through the straw in her glass. He quickly diverted his attention to something more appropriate, like applying his sunscreen again.

"Do you want to go into the water? I want to sit on the shore by the waves," she smiled. She got up and walked towards where the waves lapped at the shore and sat, shivering slightly when the water came and covered up to her belly button. He sat down beside her.

She leaned into him and he wrapped an arm around her. She took the sand and rubbed it down her legs and let the water wash it away, enjoying the feeling of the rough sand on her skin.

Later in the evening they ate dinner at a patio right on the beach. It was beautiful. Cortana could feel the salt on her skin, she loved the different food and how it tasted of charcoal and fruit. She loved icy drinks and watching the sun set over the vast, deep, blue ocean.

"I never thought I could enjoy traveling this much, this is amazing," she smiled and twisted her wedding band, a new habit she was already forming.

John found that he very much enjoyed wine with his evening meal. It didn't have the dizzying effect that many drugs had but it was extremely calming and enhanced flavors in his meal.

"I've been a lot of places, this is the first time I've enjoyed somewhere particular this much." One thing the resort staff did very well was be extremely hands off. They left them to their own devices unless they very clearly needed something.

They walked up to their room and Cortana immediately started filling the large whirlpool tub in their room. She was obsessed. She poured the complimentary salts and fragrances into the water, smiling as it started to foam slightly, not really caring that John probably didn't want to smell like a flower. She ran a hand through her hair and took off her bathing suit. She walked towards the tub and stepped in with a sigh.

John pressed a button that made the entire wall appear to be glass looking outside. This was his favorite feature of the room. He loved natural light and the comfort it provided him, particularly moonlight.

He took off his shorts and stepped into the water. They didn't have the water too hot because Cortana wanted to err on the side of caution. John had to admit, the powerful jets made his legs feel better than they had in a long time. He had had almost no lingering side effects from the augmentation procedures and even some of the discomfort he experienced in his eyes had disappeared after his encounter with the Librarian. His knees did, however ache at time, more than likely from overuse or an ACL torn one too many times and his Achilles tendon he had torn sometimes tensed up. He probably could have gotten treatment-flash-cloning a ligament and transplanting it was extremely basic, but it was very mild and he'd never had the time for a procedure, even if it only took a few hours. Hours had once been precious and meant the difference between victory and defeat. The injury had worsened slightly as he had aged. It was entirely manageable but felt nice to have some of the discomfort relieved.

"How does that feel for your knees?" she questioned.

"It doesn't bother me enough for it to really register," he deflected despite the fact that he had just been thinking about how comforting it was.

"I'll take that as they feel better. We should really get a bath tub."

"I've been thinking," he said.

"Uh-oh," she mocked. He continued without missing a beat.

"We should add on, our house is too small for us and a baby. We should make you an office above my shop equipped with the specifications you decide upon so you could do whatever you find fulfilling," he said seriously.

She smiled. It seemed such a silly thing to say but she was grateful that he pushed her needs to the forefront of his mind-he knew that she would never bring something like that to his attention because she would consider it an inconvenience. It was a terrible habit that John found perplexing, how she often refused to ask for things she needed unless he prodded.

"I've thought about room for the baby in passing but I don't have any real ideas, what were you thinking?"

"Initially I thought that we should knock down the living room wall and add another room but then I thought that we could build upwards instead-I could add a small spiraling staircase to the living room that went directly up to a room, give her her own space to play and a bathroom."

Cortana was a little surprised. She would've predicted that John wouldn't have seen the point in giving a child so much space.

"I agree, it'll give her room to grow so she'll have a place to study when she's older, a place to keep to herself if she wants."

John crossed his arms and looked very stern. "If we have the room upstairs it will be very easy for me to hear any intruders during the day and night-it would be impossible for anyone to sneak in on the lower level and I'd be able to hear if something was upstairs as well. It would be a logistical nightmare for someone to intrude without my knowing it."

Cortana frowned slightly. "John, I don't think anyone is going to try and take her," she said softly. "The UNSC--"

"It's not the UNSC I'm concerned about. There are people who would more than likely be happy to hurt myself or you. There are risks to the choices we have made. I don't know if it will ever become public knowledge who I am," who he is, the Master Chief Spartan-117, "but it has been impossible to hide that I am a Spartan. When she is school age things will come to the surface. The more she is like me the worse it will probably be, the more attention she's going to draw. It would be foolish to not take precaution."

Cortana sighed. She had sensed John's increasing sense of paranoia as her pregnancy progressed and knew that it was going to escalate when the baby was actually here. She smiled sadly and moved over by him, tucking herself under his arm.

"You shouldn't worry about being a good Father," she said quietly.

"Who said I was worried," he replied evenly.

"I know you, I can tell."

He couldn't argue. He was apprehensive. The baby wasn't this abstract concept anymore, she very much existed. She was going to come whether he was ready or not, there was no point in worrying incessantly about it but he couldn't help but feel this looming feeling. He had felt it after Reach, he had felt it after the Flood, he had felt it on Requiem, it was an indescribable feeling, all he knew was his world was going to be turned completely upside-down. Everything was going to change. It was easy to oversimplify; to say that she would just be one person, how could she change everything, but Cortana was one person and she had changed everything. To throw a new variable into that was difficult to imagine.

She watched him think, watched him get wrapped up in his own head. This wasn't going to fix itself, it wasn't going to settle into place until he was actually facing what he perceived to be the problem. Cortana sighed, knowing there were no words she could comfort him with. Perhaps it was just best to try and ignore it all together.

When she straddled him and kissed him deeply, they both knew that was the road they were taking. Worry about it when it when the problem presented itself. He almost always sorted out his feelings with physical distraction. It wasn't in Cortana's nature to put off worrying but it was what worked for him.

He loved the way she kissed him.

Objectively it seemed like a pointless, unpleasing action. He was sure that there was science that reaffirmed why kissing was important or why it felt good, but he personally never would have been able to wrap his mind around it or expect his response. He hardly cared why it felt good, he simply knew it did.

She smiled into their kiss as he lifted her out of the water and in two short steps sat down on the bed tracking water along with them.

He loved the feel of her lips against his. Little details, like how she'd worry his bottom lip with her teeth or grip his shoulders tightly drove him to a very specific, somewhat frenzied state. But more than the details of how she kissed him, he loved her honesty. There was honesty in her physicality. He could tell right now she was trying to distract him, trying to make him stop thinking so much. Right now, he felt okay with that. She would run her hands over parts of him as if she was still curious about what he felt like, as if she expected him to somehow change each time.

Everything still seemed so new to him even though they had been doing this for over a year. He couldn't help run his hands all over her because he was realizing he didn't really know how she felt anymore. Everything was changing, her stomach, her hips, her breasts, everything was fuller and somehow even more feminine. He pulled her hips towards him, grabbing her a little more roughly than he intended and she gasped at how sudden it was. She didn't move right away, she just ran her hands over his chest and his arm he had wrapped around

her. She kissed where his jaw met his neck and he found himself squeezing her closer to him. She started to move against him and he felt somewhat dazed. As her movements became more urgent, he felt the slightest twinge of sadness at her desperation-she pressed herself against him as if in doing so she could just disappear within him.

Sometimes he wanted to disappear in her, to have everything be easy again. For being a Spartan and an AI, their relationship had been very simple, defined in part by the fact that they had known each other entirely and trusted the other entirely. This, sex, was the closest they got to that former intimacy, the intimacy of existing in someone else's mind. Truly it had been her with him but he had known her two, he had known what she had felt like, known what it was like to hear her voice in his head and have no one else know...it had been a closeness that was completely indescribable and was impossible to replicate. He found himself missing it at times. Some days it felt like a wide, gaping chasm and other days they felt closer than ever before. It was difficult to place, difficult to explain and difficult to understand.

Her thighs were starting to shake in exertion and he could tell she was getting frustrated. As quickly as was sensible he pushed her so she was on her back which was becoming more difficult because of her growing abdomen. She wrapped her legs around him and thrust upwards to meet him, her breath was high and pitchy, she grasped at the sheets until her knuckles were white, the visual enough for him to collapse onto the sheets with a low, throaty sigh.

If John had had to compare it to a feeling, he would've compared it to falling. There was this feeling of completely losing all of his control, all of his inhibitions that he'd never had before. It was so uncomfortable but so natural.

She started to laugh lowly. He had no idea what she could've possibly been laughing at.

"I'm sorry, everything just kind of tickles afterwards," she ran her hand lightly over her stomach. "baby kicks a lot afterwards," she said softly. She reached over and grabbed his hand, running her hands over the calluses he'd had from holding various weapons.

She got up quickly thereafter and put on a nightgown. He wished that she hadn't, but he'd noticed subtle hints that she was starting to get uncomfortable about how she looked. This was something he didn't really understand-her body was serving a purpose, it was a function of the female anatomy, to produce and carry children. She should be glad that she was capable of performing such a duty and satisfied that she and their daughter were healthy. Instead she would almost immediately clothe herself after sex whereas she used to enjoy lying naked with him for a while or even the whole night. They had had sex less in the course of her being pregnant. Of course he understood, she had been absolutely nauseated for a solid two months but he found himself being turned away by her on a regular basis. He felt badly if it was because she didn't like her appearance, she was beautiful.

"You don't need to cover yourself," he said quietly as she sat on the edge of the bed.

"I just want to be dressed," she said, clearly a little on edge.

"You normally hate to get up after sex, you complain about getting up and brushing your teeth," he replied.

She wrung her hands. Damn him and how observant he can be. She sighed and looked down. She didn't know what to say. She felt badly. She should be grateful that she even had a body, but the angry red marks that had started to take over her abdomen and even creep up her calves and hips made her feel conscious of her appearance. She knew that gaining weight was normal and healthy and that she should be viewing herself more positively but she couldn't help but feel huge and fat. It was hard when even though he was scarred he had a figure that looked like it was carved out of marble. She knew she couldn't compare herself to him, it was silly, his body was hand crafted to be a prime physical specimen, she could never even think of living up to that nor did she really want to-exercising was not something she thoroughly enjoyed but did to make sure she stayed healthy. She knew he still found her attractive but there was a constant, nagging in her head that questioned this. Despite all of her logic, she couldn't help but feel embarrassed about how she looked.

He didn't say anything about it when he got up and put on some sleeping shorts. He looked at her and how oddly ashamed she looked. He sat on the bed next to her and held her hand in his.

"Why hide yourself from me?" He felt that being direct was the best course of action.

"I feel ugly," she blurted out. She'd never really put such a sweeping label on her feelings of insecurity.

He shook his head. He was amazed.

"You aren't, your body is all the more beautiful for its ability to take care of our daughter." This was something she had thought and even tried to tell herself but it didn't help. He noticed that she didn't seem to feel much better.

"Even if you were ugly, which you never have been, I loved you before you even had a body. What makes you think that I even care in the slightest what you look like?"

She had never thought of it that way. He had loved her, even as an AI when she couldn't touch or feel him. It was somehow comforting to think about. She smiled softly and leaned on his shoulder.

"Thank you for telling me that," she said.

He sighed. "You amaze me. You're the most brilliant person I've ever known yet some things evade you. You very clearly don't understand the things I find attractive about you," he turned down the blankets and they got into bed. Now she was curious.

"What are you talking about?"

"I like your bigger hips and legs, you feel soft," he responded simply.

"So you don't look at the marks?" she said, slightly astounded.

"What marks?"

She was amazed and a little offended. How could he be so unobservant about how their daughter was very clearly stretching her body apart? She started laughing.

"These big angry red things all over my boobs, stomach and hips?" she said astounded.

"I feel indifferent towards them. I have marks like that on my back from my growth spurt, they're all faded now, I don't understand why they're of any notice to you."

She was silent. She'd never even thought about it, but he did have faded stretch marks all over his body, it was just hardly of any notice among his scars and dense muscles. She felt a little better.

"Even though I have been inside that thick head of yours I'm never gonna know how it really works, you always manage to surprise me," was all she could say.

She snuggled against him and fell asleep rather quickly for her. He sighed. He was glad that he had made her feel better but he was still worried. Normally he wasn't one to worry. He almost always focused on the present. This child had already changed all of that. He stayed up a good part of the night simply worrying until he was finally able to fall asleep.

When he woke up that morning, the sun was shining brightly in their room. He normally didn't sleep this late, but normally he didn't stay up worrying about things out of his control. Cortana was snoring softly next to him, a characteristic that she vehemently would deny if he brought it up. It made him smile.

He normally got out of bed right away. Instead he decided to simply watch her sleep. He had never done this before but very quickly he found himself fixated upon her.

He had never thought about "beauty" or if something really had aesthetic value, most things and people were the same to him. If they served their purpose, they were good in his books. Cortana, however, could only be what would classically be defined as "beautiful." Surely her body functioned properly and there was inherent value in that, but he thought about how needlessly beautiful she was outside of that. He still couldn't believe the insecurities she had expressed last night.

He liked her short, dark hair. He liked how her pale skin was a little burnt today, her freckles on her nose darker than they normally were. She had soft dark eyelashes, when her eyes were closed they would rest slightly on the very tops of her cheeks. He was able to count every individual eyelash, one hundred and forty-five on her left and one hundred and fifty-two on her right. She slept with the smallest of smiles on her face and he couldn't help but find it endearing. He loved her lips, how they always had the slightest pout and were a perfect shade of pink.

He continued to watch her until she stretched and sat up sleepily about an hour later. She looked over at him and jumped a little bit.

"You startled me, I'm not used to you being here when I wake up," she said, her hand on her heart. She rearranged the pillows so they were propped up against the wall and she leaned against them.

"I figured staying in bed was a part of the whole honeymooning thing." He also didn't like the attention he'd get if he were to go outside running. He got up and went to go order coffee and breakfast. Very quickly after he had pressed a button he opened a door in the wall of their room and saw a tray of warm breakfast. He brought it to her and she smiled sleepily. She took forever to really wake up and failed to be really alert unless she had had coffee.

"Mm, thank you," she said sipping the warm coffee, almost instantly perking up a little. After they picked at breakfast neither of them really made to move. Cortana looked over at him, still dressed in his sleeping shorts and an undershirt.

Oddly enough, they spent the rest of the day similarly, staying in bed, relaxing and talking. It reminded Cortana of when they had been reunited. After he had gotten over his disbelief, they had sat together for what must surely have been a full day, at times speaking and at other times just being silent. It was all he could have asked for, being there with her, seeing her smile and hearing her voice was soothing for him. It was a perfect day.

* * *

><p>Oh I'm sorry, have you all died of fluff and gone into cardiac arrest? Well I won't expect reviews then... :P :P<p>

I'm mega busy right now applying for jobs and whatnot so that's why this chapter took longer than normal. I've also kinda hit a wall with the story like, over 9000 chapters ahead. Luckily I've given myself plenty of time to find inspiration again because I seriously have a crap ton of this story written...It's a little shameful. I'm in my last term of senior year so bear with me, I have a lot of 'actual reading' I should be doing...(whatever...). Have a great day!

16. Chapter 16

Wow it's been a while! I've been having some obnoxious migraines lately and am trying to graduate college so bleh! Here's a super long chapter to make up for it. Thanks all of you who review, it sincerely brightens my day. Welcome to your dosage of halo fluff! :D

* * *

><p>When they came home, Catherine was cleaning their kitchen. Cortana couldn't help but still feel odd about her presence. It was like having an actual mother, and on one hand that was nice but it also came with all of the annoying things about having an actual mother. Sometimes she just found her annoying even when she meant to be helpful. Other times, she actually was a bitch.<p>

"Did you enjoy your trip?" she questioned.

Cortana felt her eye twitch a little. _How come everything she says has to sound so sarcastic?_

John looked at Cortana and was confused at why she was exhibiting tendencies characteristic of early anger. The way she rubbed her hands together and clenched her jaw, he could see it a mile away and usually tried to avoid her.

"It was very nice," spoke John quietly, he opened the set of glassware that Lasky and Palmer had gifted them and set them in the washer. Cortana didn't say anything as she walked quickly to their bedroom to busy herself with something.

Catherine looked at the hallway Cortana had just stomped to.

"Is she okay?"

"She was fine until a minute ago," said John quietly.

It got worse. As the weeks wore on, Cortana started feeling more and more irritable. John sat next to her on their bed while Dr. Halsey operated the ultrasound imaging. Cortana's belly had swelled to ridiculous sizes, her skin stretched with more dark red marks. She had bruises near her ribs where the baby had kicked her too hard. She constantly lotioned just to avoid how much her stretching skin itched.

Dr. Halsey sighed. "Unless you want to do a caesarean, which I would not advise unless it's an emergency, I'm going to have to give you an artificial dose of relaxin. It will make your hip and pelvic muscles able to move around a little more to accommodate your larger baby. You're hips aren't too narrow so anatomically you have that playing to your advantage here, and from what I can tell your baby is more _long_ than anything, she's not particularly bulky."

"What risks does that entail?" questioned John.

"One in five women who receive relaxin before childbirth will dislocate their hip within the next year, nothing too horrendous," she said mildly.

Cortana groaned. "Yes exactly what I need, a dislocated hip with a _Spartan_ baby_ running around. I don't know if you've noticed but she's beating the shit out of me from the _i__nside_, " she gestured at a large bruise near her ribs,

"How much longer do you think this is going to be, I haven't slept in weeks and my ankles are so swollen I can't fit into any shoes."

"You're at forty weeks right now, so you're full term. Babies are considered due at forty weeks, as you know, but it's not uncommon for mothers to go two weeks past this, especially first time mothers," said Halsey clinically.

Cortana felt like weeping. "You have the most terrible fucking bedside manner in the world, if I could, I would go back in time and tell _you _when you were forty weeks pregnant that you were going to

be pregnant for a whole extra month!" she growled vengefully.

Dr. Halsey sighed. "This is one of many, _many _reasons I didn't become a practitioner of medicine," she continued to adjust the imagine and felt a rush of warmth at what she saw, "Oh look, your daughter is sucking her thumb, just like her father used to," she said softly.

John couldn't help but feel an emotional response. She had the most precious smile on her face as she sucked her thumb. She looked so safe.

"She looks happy," he observed softly.

"Of course she's happy, her mother loves her very much," sighed Cortana tiredly. She pulled down her shirt and sighed, seemingly bored by the moment and irritated about the entire scenario. She turned on the television. She had moved it into their room since she had been on bedrest for the past month. She was surprised to see Kelly.

"What theâ€¦|.?"

"We are honored to show Spartan Class IIs Kelly and Fred around the new training complex here on Reach. We strive to make the Spartans _truly _the best of the best for Earth and her colonies," spoke a tall female Spartan-IV, her hair cropped short and angular. She was wearing a bio-suit as teams of Spartans behind her did training exercises lifting tree trunks together, clearly having not undergone the surgical procedures that would've made it easier.

Kelly stood tall next to Fred. Kelly was wearing shorts and a stretchy maternity shirt. If she was uncomfortable she didn't show it even though it looked really hot out. She looked rather large. Somehow being pregnant made her look even more intimidating, especially when she was standing next to a normal sized person. If Cortana wasn't used to being around giants she would've definitely found her appearance shocking.

"I can't believe that this is what's happening," murmured Catherine.

"It's not that big of a deal, they're creating a story. People would riot if they knew the whole truth, which will probably come out after we're all long gone. If Fred and Kelly don't mind putting out a few fires for the UNSC it's not that big of a deal, it's probably good for the Spartan branch," said Cortana, paying attention to the story.

"What's it like being here, you must have a lot of memories," the PR Petty Officer questioned.

"Things are very different since Reach was terraformed. Team exercises are the most crucial thing about being a Spartan so it's good to see that that hasn't changed," she said politely.

What a dumb fucking question, Cortana mused.

The camera panned around and showed the Spartans-in-training crawling through the muck and sand.

After Fred spoke a few stiff words to some of the instructors, it changed to more of an interview.

"What has the transition from being a Spartan to civilian been like?"

Kelly frowned.

"I am still a Spartan, I can't really _stop _being a Spartan, I'm a 6'5'' female, I can run a three minute mile and I can lift a car over my head, it's all of who I am. But transitioning from _military _life to civilian life has been difficult and every service member faces this reality if they are lucky enough. A big challenge for all of us, I think, is understanding that right now, tomorrow is a reality. We've fought the war and it's done for now. That doesn't mean that it isn't important that we are constantly vigilant, but it's hard to relax after living our whole lives the way we did."

"What would you say your favorite thing about civilian life is?"

"I like doing work, taking pictures and listening to music has been fulfilling for me," said Fred softly.

"Sounds like you should've been in public affairs," the interviewer joked. Fred chuckled very half-heartedly.

"I like the opportunity to just _do _things. I love my students at Central City Primary School 410, and my brother recently got married, it's exciting to be able to attend things like that when it wouldn't have been an option during the war," smiled Kelly.

"She brought you up, this is where the interview is going to get dicey," said Cortana almost excitedly.

"I'm sure she was briefed on a story that is appropriate for the public," said John quietly. At least he hoped.

"So you live near your brother?"

"Yes, very close. I jog to his house a lot. It's a little over fifteen miles away."

The interviewer laughed "Only a fifteen mile jog," Kelly flushed a little bit.

"Your brother is a Spartan as well, correct?"

"Yes, we both retired around the same time. It's very nice to see him, we spent almost the entire Human-Covenant War apart, we've been catching up on lost time," she reached into her bag and pulled out a photo of her and John at his wedding. John wasn't smiling and looked rather stern while he posed for the picture with Kelly who was wearing a huge grin, one that Cortana knew hadn't been commonplace until very recently. Cortana found herself surprised at how well the both of them photographed, they were both very attractive people. John photographed very severely-he looked somehow even more out of place than he normally did. Perhaps it was just the very idea of the photograph that was strange to Cortana.

"This is my brother and I on his wedding day, that's how he looks when he's happy," she joked.

The interviewer laughed a little nervously, "I don't want to see him angry."

"It's not that much different, he's rather somber. Spending time with him is my favorite part of civilian life. It's weird because when we were young he was my team leader so it was hard to not think of him in that capacity for a while, but now it's nice to experience what we are both like in a more relaxed setting. Fred and I are also very excited to be parents soon," she smiled a little bashfully.

"How has that been going for the two of you?"

"Pregnancy is wonderful-I love feeling the baby move and I'm so excited to know my child. It is a wonderfully experience that many experience but it's simultaneously a miracle to me, I find the entire process humbling."

"My next photo series will actually focus on our civilian life and the process of becoming parents. It's been a journey in a way that most of life is," said Fred.

"I know that you have been rather successful as an artist since your retirement."

"I have an interesting perspective and I think that people connect to that," he said simply.

"Well congratulations to the both of you."

Dr. Halsey stood up and left with a sigh, shaking her head. For some reason the entire thing made her feel nauseated.

Cortana frowned. She knew Halsey was upset by the notion of her Spartans moving on and having some semblance of a life. She didn't like the Spartan-IV program and what it represented in her eyes-it was a bastardization of her work.

The interview continued on with mundane things and patriotic ramblings, things of no real import. John felt glad that Kelly found such happiness in their relationship.

Cortana groaned and John looked at her, slightly on edge.

"Baby is stretching and I cannot breathe," she said slightly strained. She was so uncomfortable, and so irritable. She hadn't been sleeping, John was up most of the night while she tossed and turned trying to get comfortable but a lack of sleep didn't phase him too much. For Cortana it meant that she got irrational and sometimes just plain mean. Catherine had made a point of avoiding her. John remembered their last altercation.

"_Why _do you have to be such a condescending _bitch?_" she had shouted. Catherine had just pointed out that John was making good progress on the upstairs addition. Cortana didn't pay any mind to her shocked expression. "I am serious, let's get this straight right now, for years I existed as an artificial construct that could process the entirety of _existence _in seconds. I do _not _need you belittling

the life that I live and I'm tired of everything you say being so sarcastic and cynical! If you could just put a cap on it until I have this super-human baby that is trying to claw her way out of me I would _greatly _appreciate it!"

She had stomped out of the room. John looked to Dr. Halsey in complete shock.

"I've never seen her this way," he had said, slightly afraid.

"Unfortunately these kind of things happen, hormones can be an odd thing. Only thing you can really do is let her say what she wants and ignore it," she had stated dryly.

"She should apologize to you."

"There's no point. She's partially right, I am very sarcastic and rather jaded. I can only imagine it's frustrating for Cortana because she is correct, her intellect was vaster than I ever could've known, that was how I created her."

For the most part John endured as well as he could.

"I'm sorry I'm not a happy, nice pregnant lady like Kelly," she sighed, stretching out on the bed, "I'm just so, so uncomfortable John, I know it must seem silly to you of all people but I can't sleep which I know doesn't bother you but that bothers normal people. My stomach is so itchy and I feel so huge and disgusting. I have to pee constantly and whenever I think I might get some sleep she starts kicking," she felt like crying.

He ran a hand over her forehead and through her hair as comfortingly as he could. "It's fine. You don't need to be happy or nice if you don't want to, you can feel however you like," he said quietly.

She composed herself as best she could. "Have you thought of any names?" she asked softly.

"I have one I might like," he said.

"Tell me, I can't think of anything I like enough," she said.

"I thought about what you said, about how you wanted her name to have meaning, something for her to be inspired by and I thought about my history lessons."

"And?" Cortana pressed.

"I like the name Joan, after Joan of Arc."

"Hmm. A French warrior commander maiden who died a hero for what she believed in. Somehow, it fits," she smiled the more she thought about it. "I really like it, it's strong and simple, it's perfect. Perfect for the daughter of a hero."

John looked down awkwardly. "I couldn't have done what I did without you. That was made apparent when you were gone. You are as much of a hero as me," he said firmly.

"It's hard to feel like a hero when I can't do half of the things I was capable of as an AI and I look like a beached whale," she sighed pulling a light blanket over herself. She had taken to only sleeping with one blanket because she complained of being too warm constantly. She arranged pillows around herself trying to find a way to be comfortable.

He didn't know what to say when she said things like that so most often he chose to say nothing. He thought she was wonderful, intelligent and beautiful but he couldn't possibly understand what she had been capable of as an AI and how impaired she might feel at times.

"Joan also means a gracious gift from God," he continued.

She smiled softly. "Do you feel that way about our little girl, that she's a gift?"

John spent a lot of time feeling anxious about being a father. It was difficult for him to imagine what she would be like but when he looked at pictures of her sucking her tiny thumb, when he had felt her kick up at him, he couldn't help but think that she was perhaps the greatest gift he'd ever be trusted with. He had decided that being a parent was a promise—a promise as important as any vow he had ever taken, a promise to care for and protect another human life.

He hadn't ever thought much upon God but, in some capacity, he believed in a soul. He had felt sure of this when Cortana was an AI—she had been just as real to him even though she hadn't had a body, a body wasn't what someone was, it was a soul that made someone who they were. Being entrusted with guiding another human soul through life was going to be a great gift and honor.

"I believe that raising her with you may be my greatest achievement. It's a high honor to be entrusted with the care of another soul."

"I didn't know you were so philosophical," she said softly, the ghost of a smile apparent in her tone.

"I've believed in the idea of a soul since I've known you, though not necessarily in a theological sense.. It just makes sense to me. Nothing really philosophical about it."

"Well, you have been the most wonderful gift in my life, I think our daughter will be the same. Joan is perfect for her in every sense," she closed her eyes as she tried to relax.

He felt warm. He felt happy. He had been so lucky, so lucky that he was alive and so lucky that Cortana had chosen him as her Spartan and partner.

"Is there anything you need?"

"Some more water would be nice."

He brought it to her and she thanked him. She really did look miserable. John had never spent time with a pregnant woman before, it wasn't common during deep space travel for a woman to be pregnant, they were usually sent on leave unless it wasn't logically possible.

Accidental pregnancies very seldom occurred in the UNSC-all males and females were given shots that regulated fertility when they were on a ship or in the field. Sexual relations on ships were frowned upon but most surely happened. He thought of Palmer and Lasky-he wondered how they made that work, logistically, without compromising their images. They would probably try to get orders to a homeworld-with their service records they shouldn't have a problem getting almost any assignment they wanted.

Cortana closed her eyes trying to sleep. He scratched her arm lightly like he knew she liked. He wasn't able to sleep so he wasn't going to pretend to, he'd watch her all night and take a nap tomorrow afternoon if he could. She was too restless and he was too worried about her. He had never felt so anxious in his entire life. He let his mind wander to distract himself.

Lasky had contacted him about a month after he and Cortana got married. He had called purely in a social capacity and John found it strange initially but then pleasant. He knew Cortana and Kelly were in contact for ninety percent of the day, constantly messaging the other and he had no idea what they could possibly be talking about.

For a few hours she slept fitfully. Around 0200, he noticed that she was awake but still trying to rest.

"Cortana?"

"Hmm?" she groaned.

"Are you okay?"

She didn't respond and went to the bathroom.

She walked out into their bedroom and continued to pace around, holding her back.

"I think I've been having contractions since midnight but now they're getting a bit closer together," she said.

Without speaking, John walked out into the living room and shook Dr. Halsey awake.

Catherine looked up to see the John looming over her. It was a fairly startling way to be awoken. He didn't say anything but she knew why he was waking her. She got up and went into their bedroom where Cortana was pacing uncomfortably.

"How quickly are they coming? Have you timed them?"

"Every eight minutes for the past hour," she said.

"You two should go for a walk. Make sure that this isn't false labor, come back in an hour or if you feel that you need to," she said, writing some information down.

Cortana nodded and put on a pair of slip on sandals, not changing out of her nightgown.

She wanted to talk to John while they walked but it was difficult for her to think about much besides how painful it already was. She didn't want to show him how uncomfortable she was, she knew he had been through so much worse but she didn't know how she was going to endure this process.

They walked quietly for about forty-five minutes, pausing at times when she had to focus on not crying out.

They went back to their house and as she stepped into the doorway she felt an odd gush, like she had just wet her pants.

"Dr. Halsey," John called.

She ran to the entry way, looked at Cortana and her shocked facial expression then looked at the ground.

"It's all clear so that's good," she said.

They went to their bedroom and she started monitoring the baby's heartbeat through a patch she put on Cortana's stomach.

"Everything is fine, now we wait," she said.

John was surprised.

He had never imagined that it would be so painful for her. She paced around like she was a caged animal, groaning and panting as she labored. After a few hours of this, she couldn't keep walking and had to lay down. She cried out as if some invisible force was pressing itself down on her.

For hours she labored in pain. She couldn't imagine an end to this-that her life was forever going to be this nonstop episode of pain. John wondered why they couldn't give her anything to help reduce the pain, he knew there were drugs that could help but Catherine insisted that she had only been able to bring along the essentials. It angered him seeing her suffer. Cortana tried to insist that she was fine but he knew that what she was experiencing was excruciating for her. He could only imagine how hard it was for someone who'd never even experienced something as simple as a broken bone to go through this. Pain had become a familiar sensation for him to the point that it was almost possible for him to ignore it.

"You're progressing, I'm going to administer the relaxin, hard part is coming up soon." She took a syringe and injected the hormone.

She groaned in response, incapable of much else.

She was laying on the bed and wanted to give up and cry. She was exhausted and trembling.

She had held up fairly well in the way of not screaming or crying, until everything changed. Everything was hazy and everything got more intense.

"I can't do this, there's no way. You don't understand how painful this is, I don't care what you've been through, this is indescribable," she whimpered.

"You're doing well, what you're doing is important," he tried to console. "Think of it this way, there is no possible way for you to be weaker than the pain you're experiencing because the pain is coming from you yourself, your pain in this situation is your strength," he tried to help her rationalize it, to help her feel better in any way he could.

"I don't think I can," she just whimpered in response. He wasn't sure if she was capable of saying much else.

John supposed that pain was a relative thing, that pain of a particular event was contingent upon the individual experiencing it and their perception of it. He didn't care if he had experienced 'worse' pain, what mattered was he was witnessing her in pain, and it was difficult for him.

She continued to insist she couldn't do it until 1548 when their daughter was born.

Cortana cried and reached down for her baby, bringing her up onto her chest. She was covered in blood and screaming loudly. She swore that the room had lit up, as if the presence of their daughter could do such a thing.

"John she's so perfect I can't believe this is happening," she sobbed running her hand all over their screaming girl. "Sweet, sweet girl, everything is okay, you're here, we did it," she whispered as she continued to sob.

John couldn't help but look on in awe. Cortana was covered in sweat and now blood. She looked like a mess, he had never seen her so entirely exhausted. Despite her tears, sweat and matted hair she had never looked more beautiful to him. She suffered to bring their daughter into the world and it had been nothing short of amazing. He had never had a moment like this, an individual event that seemed so important, so defining. He looked at their daughter. She hardly looked like a person, she was bloody, purple and screaming.

Dr. Halsey looked on as John kissed Cortana's temple and wrapped an arm around her. It was a scene that had occurred so many times before throughout history but she couldn't help but feel that she was intruding on the moment.

Her children, having children. It was the only way that seemed right to think about it. Would Miranda have had children? She wouldn't have seen them.

_Don't worry-your secret's safe with me and I'm not going to tell anyone that you're my mother because I'm pretty sure I know what you've done and I love dad too much to see him associated with it. I don't know which is worse-waiting for everyone to find out what you did, or waiting to see if I take after you. If it's all the same to you, mother dear, I'm going to make sure I take after Dad. _

She had the message memorized. What she had done. She didn't even deserve to be here and witness the birth of a new child. It was a sick joke. She told herself she was here for the child, to make sure the child of her Spartan was healthy and safe, that maybe she could somehow atone in doing this. Part of her knew that she was here out

of curiosity. She wanted to know. She needed to know, to understand what this all meant and what the Librarian had intended for the child.

She started to clean up and prepare for bloodwork and testing.

After a moment, Cortana handed the baby to Catherine to clean her up and weigh her. Cortana felt too tired to get up and follow.

Catherine's eyes widened slightly when she measured the child. "Nineteen pounds seven ounces," she announced. "She is rather slim for that though, her bone and muscle must be denser than an average human," she observed. The baby cried out when she took a tiny blood sample and gave her the standard set of vaccinations newborns received. She wrapped the baby up and gave her to her waiting father.

John had never held a baby before and was surprised at how intuitive it was. She was already sleeping after her upset about the shots. John realized he hadn't even taken note of what color her eyes were yet, or really anything about her specifically, he had simply been overwhelmed by her very existence.

Looking down at her in his arms he saw that she had the same smattering of freckles both he and Cortana had. She had hair that was surprisingly red. Her eyelashes were fine and lighter than her hair. John was amazed at everything about her. He couldn't help but touch her tiny fingernails and marvel at how she was just like anybody, just tinier.

"Have you two decided on a name?" questioned Catherine.

John went and sat next to Cortana and gave her the baby. The look on Cortana's face as she gazed upon their daughter was the happiest he had seen her in a long, long time.

"Joan," said John simply.

The doctor couldn't help but smirk a little at the irony, naming their daughter after a renowned female warrior. It was quite fitting.

"I'll leave you two for a bit to get to know your daughter while I run a few tests," she said smiling softly.

"Could you call Kelly and Fred please?" Cortana asked, not looking away from her new daughter.

"Of course, what should I say?"

"Tell them they can come over in a few hours," John said. He wanted some time with just them together.

Catherine nodded and left the room.

With a little bit of fumbling and teamwork, Cortana found nursing to be initially painful but doable.

"I feel at a loss for words, which is uncommon for me. I almost

always have something to say," she chuckled a little.

"I understand." There were no words to describe the moment, how she had fought to bring their daughter into the world. He couldn't help but respect her more. It hadn't been pretty and most certainly wasn't for the faint of heart, it was the most blood he'd seen since he'd retired.

He held her closer to him, she leaned on his shoulder. "You should feel proud of yourself, you did something amazing today, you were very strong."

She smiled tiredly. "I didn't feel strong, thank you," she yawned a little.

"Why don't you let me take her, you should sleep," he said.

She sighed. "I know you're right, I just don't want to stop looking at her," she traced a finger over their sleeping daughter's cheek.

"She'll be here when you wake up," he said.

"Okay baby Joan, time to go to Daddy because mom is tired," Cortana whispered, handing her over to him. She made a few soft noises but kept sleeping.

Even though she was apparently very large for a newborn baby, she seemed so tiny to John. He could cradle her comfortably in one arm. He looked at Cortana and she had already closed her eyes and started sleeping, it was the quickest he'd ever seen her fall asleep.

He decided to go sit on the couch in the living room. Catherine was good about folding it up during the day, she was a polite guest. He sat down a little too quickly and Joan opened her eyes wide. She seemed startled and started to cry.

He didn't really know what to do, what do babies like? She started to cry louder and got more upset.

"It's okay Joan," he said quietly.

"Try rocking her back and forth," said Catherine, sitting down in chair adjacent to him. She demonstrated a rocking motion with her arm.

He did so and her cries quieted down until she was just looking up at him. Her eyes were blue, but different than her mother's. They were soft and clear, truly baby blue. He had read they might change a little bit as she aged. He couldn't help but smile at her. She reached out and grabbed his finger tightly, her whole hand clenched around his index finger. She pulled his finger to her mouth and started sucking on it lightly. He pulled away and she immediately replaced his finger with her thumb and started to sleep more.

He ran his hand over her head. She had quite a bit of hair. It was an interesting reddish brown.

"I can already tell you're going to spoil her," said Catherine watching him hold her.

John thought about this for a moment. He most certainly hadn't been spoiled. Cortana had never been a child. He couldn't help but look at her and want to give her everything. It was how he loved anything, when he loved he gave everything he had showing very little restraint. He had done so for the UNSC, he had done so for humanity, he had done so for Cortana and he was going to love his daughter the same.

"Why wouldn't I? I tore apart the galaxy for her mother, I can't do anything less for my daughter," he joked quietly, not wanting to wake her.

"The day she figures that out is a day the universe should fear," Catherine laughed.

It was true though, he already knew there was nothing he wouldn't do for her. It scared him a little bit. He always accepted his place. When the UNSC needed a Spartan, he became a Spartan. When the UNSC needed a Chief, he became one. When the world had needed a hero, he became one. Cortana needed him and he went to her. Joan needed a father, so here he was.

"I understand why you did what you did, taking me to be a Spartan. But if anyone tries to do the same to her they won't succeed. She is mine. She belongs with me and Cortana."

"Perhaps in the same way you belonged with your mother and father. But the world needed you. What would you say if the world needed her?"

John thought on it. He felt very conflicted right now. He had never thought about how his birth parents must have felt when he was taken, how that must have hurt them, until now. He already knew he couldn't lose her, knew that it would ruin him and he'd only held her in his arms for a few hours.

"I wouldn't worry about it John. Because of the work I did on the Spartan-II program, scientific advancements have been made. The biological augmentation procedures in trial for a Spartan-V program are beyond even what I was able to imagine and they work on adults. All made possible by seventy-five children, one time," she said wearily. She looked at the sleeping baby and couldn't help but feel a great and terrible sadness. She hadn't expected that. Hadn't expected to feel guilt even just seeing the child. The sweet, soft, new baby.

John looked at her and saw her guilt and pain. He felt conflicted.

"After a few days, once I make sure Cortana is okay, I will probably return to my home, I'm very behind on research. I can visit to do check-ups on Joan, it would be best to observe her development and test her abilities as she ages. You're going to have your hands full with her."

John nodded. Catherine went to busy herself with something. Anything to get her away from the child.

A few hours passed and John was amazed at how she just slept. He

supposed she must be tired from what she had endured, being born and all. She looked so peaceful. He heard Cortana wake up and start taking a shower. When she was all cleaned up, she went out by John and sat next to him. He handed her the baby automatically.

"John, we have a baby," she said. It was such an odd concept.

He nodded. He understood her need to say it aloud, it was just so strange.

Kelly walked in, she had stopped knocking a few months ago. Even though she was very pregnant, she was just as mobile and had managed to avoid looking like she was waddling everywhere somehow. Her face lit up upon seeing them. Fred followed her quietly and his facial expression softened when he saw them with their baby.

"Joan it's time to meet your Aunt Kelly and Uncle Fred," Cortana said smiling. "Do you want to hold her?"

Kelly nodded quickly. She bent over to pick her up. She cradled her gently as if she was made entirely of glass and sat down in the chair closest to John and Cortana.

"She is so beautiful," she breathed. "Joan?"

"Mhmm, John came up with it and I liked it," said Cortana watching her friend handle her baby.

"She looks so much like John," she said looking down at her face.

"She does, she's got my mouth but that's about it I think. We'll see," Cortana smiled.

John supposed she did look like him. He had been so focused on the fact that she even existed he hadn't made the connection that she did, in fact, resemble him. Of course it was hard to tell because she was so tiny, but he understood what they were talking about.

Kelly's expression was one of pure adoration when she looked upon their daughter. She was completely enamored.

"How were things? How are you? We brought you some food and a present for Joan," said Kelly quickly.

Cortana smiled, "We're very happy right now. It's all very unreal. I'm doing well, I'm a little wobbly on my feet. I napped for a few hours and that was very nice," she rested her hand on John's knee.

"We can talk details later if you'd like but you'll know soon enough," she said looking at Kelly's growing belly.

"I don't feel like it's going to be soon, I feel like baby is staying put for a bit but we will see," Kelly said running a hand over her stomach.

"Do you know what you're having?"

"No, Fred and I decided we wanted a surprise," said Kelly passing the

baby to Fred.

Fred was a little awkward at first, having never held a baby before. She started to fuss.

"Hold her closer to your chest, she's used to hearing my heartbeat so I think she likes that," coached Cortana.

He adjusted her a little bit and she quieted down. He laughed a little. "She's much prettier than John, I don't know what you two are talking about."

Cortana started laughing. "Fred I don't think I've ever heard you make a joke, when you do you're funny."

"Glad to know that you don't find me pretty," John replied sardonically.

Kelly smiled, "I talk too much, Fred can be funny if you listen closely."

Kelly and Fred left after gifting Joan a floppy eared stuffed rabbit. John smiled at this, remembering Kelly's nickname. Before they knew it the sun was setting on the first day of their daughter's life. Cortana couldn't help but think about how they would never have this day again. It was odd because one could say that about any day, but today was a special day.

They had bought a bassinet to put in their room for before she moved to her own room eventually. John was pleased about this, even though he knew he could hear anything in their new upstairs, he didn't want to be away from her.

They laid in bed. Both of them were very tired, John hadn't slept in over two days which wasn't a record or anything but it still wasn't pleasant.

John could hear her breathing. It was soft. If he tried, he could hear her tiny heart beating. It was strange to think about how he hadn't known her until today, he felt as if he had known her for a lifetime. He fell asleep with thoughts of forever.

* * *

><p>Aaaand there we go, baby! Didn't want to get too into childbirth even though I'm well versed in the subject-not a fun narrative to read really, lol. Like I said, sorry for the long wait and I hope you guys enjoyed it. Pretty fluffy but no one seems to be complaining...anyone read the newest Halo Escalation? AHHAH SO many feels, Terrance you one baaaad dude! :P Til next time!<p>

17. Chapter 17

Got some major time jumping this chapter and some good stuff! I hope you like it. I also really wanted to delve into Halsey's character more-I, unlike a lot of the Halo fandom refuse to label her as entirely evil or entirely good (I feel like people always want to make her one or the other when really she's just quite morally grey).

* * *

><p>Catherine stayed later than she had planned because she wanted to meet Kelly and Fred's baby. She had figured that she may as well stay, she had already sinned enough in being around Joan.<p>

Every night Catherine woke up when Joan cried.

Every night she cried when Joan cried.

She remembered when Miranda was gone and she still would wake up in the middle of the night. She had woken up because she hadn't heard her cry and was scared, scared that something was wrong.

Nothing had been wrong, she had just been gone.

It was worse when John got up with the baby.

She could hear him, his low rumble of a voice soothing her and talking to her tenderly. She wondered if that's what Jacob sounded like when he had taken care of Miranda. She had never once enjoyed Miranda with her father, never once looked upon her smiling face with him. She would never know what it would've been like to have raised her.

She had denied herself all of these things, no one had taken them from her and it still hurt.

She didn't feel any better. She didn't feel like she had paid for any of her sins and she had just created more sadness.

_No. It was for the best. Miranda was better off without a mother than with me. _

She felt her heart clench in her chest. It was so much pain.

She heard a door open and footsteps. She tried to stop sniffing. She felt absolutely pathetic. She knew it was John and the baby-she could hear the baby's tiny, soft breaths. He stood there, she could feel his presence and she knew that he knew she wasn't asleep.

She sat up slowly, quickly wiping at her eyes. She didn't say anything. She didn't know what to say.

John sat on the end of the bed quietly with the child. She could tell he was thinking. There was enough moonlight this evening for her to see him relatively clearly.

"You've done this for the last five nights," he said plainly.

For a few moments she still couldn't speak.

"I apologize," she finally rasped.

He didn't look at her but continued to look down at his tiny girl who was now happily asleep in his arms. She watched him run his thumb over her brow.

John didn't know what to say. He wasn't entirely sure what was

troubling her.

He knew that she was a mother whose child was dead. He didn't know the circumstances, he didn't know much of anything about the woman's personal life even though he was sure Cortana did, but even after only knowing his daughter a short time he could hardly imagine the thought of such a loss.

That was enough for it to make sense to him.

"Would you like to hold her?"

She nodded.

She hadn't held her but for a few moments when she was born. She made a few noises as she left her father's safe embrace but continued to sleep soundly in her arms.

She had a soft patch of auburn hair and a smattering of freckles on soft pale skin-she could recall when John had had freckles as a little boy. She was a tiny little thing but she could see that she would look a lot like her father. Catherine felt the strangest surge of emotions overcome her, some combination of extreme pain and pure adoration.

"She really is perfect," she whispered shakily. Her tone of voice was almost reverent.

She started to cry again, this time sobbing in earnest. Something about it was too much, it hit her over and over again at some broken part of her that she'd tried to forget for a long time.

John looked at her. He didn't know what to do. When Cortana was upset he usually tried to ground her in absolutes, to tell her that he would do anything for her and that everything would be okay no matter what.

He couldn't make anything okay with the doctor. He felt lost.

He put his hand on her shoulder in what he hoped was a comforting gesture. He could feel her trembling as she continued to look down at his daughter.

She made a quick attempt at composing herself.

"I'm sorry John. Of all people you are the last that I deserve kindness from," she said softly. She felt like she was reprimanding a small child, correcting a bad behavior.

_Don't treat me well. I ruined your life. _

It felt good to be a martyr in some ways-it would almost be easier if he had hated her, if he understood well enough to hate her.

For the first time ever, John actually thought about this. She had been responsible for him being taken from his mother and father. He had had no childhood. He had suffered. He didn't know his full name. He hadn't been able to really _feel _anything until Cortana had helped him.

"You're right," he said, looking directly at her.

Halsey felt her heart break. She hadn't known that that was a real feeling but there was no other way to describe it, she felt like her heart was tearing in two.

His expression softened. "But it doesn't matter. This world isn't about owing people things. I don'tâ€¦" he paused, searching for the right words. "I can't understand how you must feel. Losing people is difficult. I have known many good men and women and most of them are dead, your daughter and the Captain included in that number," He paused and wrung his hands, a habit she didn't really recall him having.

He didn't know what the Doctor's relationship with the Captain had been, but having a child with someone was a bond. Having a child with Cortana made him love her more than he had ever thought possible-Joan was the both of them and it connected them on a level that even they hadn't already shared. There had to have been some sort of mourning she felt for the Captain, even if it was on a basic level.

"But all you can do is try to move on. I have no right to say this to you after how I...reacted, when Cortana sacrificed herself for me. I let it consume me completely, I was lost and completely broken, I wasn't able to function without her after I had been with her so long. It felt like having a part of myself, my favorite part of myself, die. I know it's not the loss of a child but it wasâ€¦" she saw his eyes darken with what she knew as grief at the mere thought of it, "It was the closest I have ever been to hell, and I've knocked at the door a few times throughout my career. The only thing that kept me going was the tiniest hope that she was still out there somewhere. If I had truly thought she had been gone forever, I would have died," he said simply.

_How poetic would that have been, the Master Chief dying of a broken heart, _she thought sadly. She somehow believed him. She could see it and she wondered why she couldn't feel that way, truly feel that way about anyone or anything.

"Kelly said something to me once," he continued. "She told me that it's irreverent to those who are gone to do anything less than live your life to the fullest degree of possible happiness. That's why I asked Cortana to marry me, I wanted her to be happy and to live the rest of my days with her." He took his hand off of her shoulder and sighed. She passed Joan back over to him silently feeling that it was the right time.

He got up quietly and slowly, trying not to disturb his sleeping baby.

"Think about that for a little bit, it may help you," he said as he walked toward his bedroom.

Catherine rubbed at her eyes again and crawled back into bed.

Oh John...You are too good for this world. If only I had been crying for the reasons you thought I was.

She looked up at the ceiling blankly.

_I cried because when I held your daughter and looked upon her face, her sweet, innocent face that's so similar to your own, I felt love and awe that I never experienced when I had held my own daughter.

—

Catherine didn't sleep that night.

That night, Kelly had her baby, another little girl who was named Samantha. She was much tinier than Joan, at least ten pounds lighter.

_Do you want us to visit you at the hospital? _Cortana had messaged her.

Kelly had responded with four pictures of her baby and an emphatic _Yes! _

Kelly looked both exhausted and elated in the hospital. She held her tiny bundle of a daughter close to her, her eyes not leaving her once.

Cortana couldn't help but feel extremely moved by the moment-she knew how badly Kelly and Fred had both wanted this and seeing the both of them finally with their child was more gratifying than she had anticipated.

The weeks following the birth of their children flew by. Catherine left quickly after Sam was born. Cortana didn't question it but she knew that she had been upset for the weeks following the arrival of the children.

Cortana was excited because Kelly hadn't come to visit for a long while, things had been so busy.

Joan was already starting to become interested in most things, particularly hair. She tugged at hair with surprising strength.

"Cortana?"

"I'm in the living room," Cortana said, propping Joan up on her stomach. She liked to see what was going on around her and preferred to be held so she was facing outwards instead of up most of the time.

"How are you feeling, how are you healing?" questioned Cortana as Kelly sat down.

"I'm feeling a lot better, time has most assuredly helped," she paused. "I never thought upon the pains of childbirth. I assumed that because I have been through extreme amounts of pain that something like that wouldn't really register. I have never been more wrong in my life," she laughed a little.

"You're telling me, I screamed at John towards the end, I think he's still a little traumatized. It's really unlike anything. Men are so blissfully ignorant."

"They kind of miss out though, it was a life changing experience for me. There was a moment where I knew I could do it, where I knew that

I could bring her into the world and it was very empowering."

Kelly had an interesting way of viewing things. Her entire life was defined by physical accomplishments, being fast or strong. To embark on a physical challenge like childbirth had been interesting and produced very clear results. She was happy knowing what her body had been capable of.

She had been scared that her body had been changed too much, that her bones were too strong, her muscles too unforgiving for her to properly carry and birth a child. She had been a machine of war, a perfect soldier, her body hadn't been meant to create and deliver a child. It was amazing to know that despite how much her body had been changed, she had been able to do something so inspired by love.

She had struggled like all mothers before her. The doctor didn't know what to do when in a moment of pain she broke two of Fred's fingers-a feat that should have been close to impossible. The emotions she felt were shocking. She was scared that she wouldn't know how to be a mother, that this had all been an unnatural mistake, that she was going to hurt her child somehow.

"I never had a moment like that. I yelled at John the whole time that I couldn't do it. He of course insisted that I could and would. He has a very fine way of viewing the world-things that must be done and things that must be done, there is no can and cannot for him," she chuckled a little.

"Mm, I used to feel that way as a Spartan until I was truly defeated. Then I developed a much more cynical perspective, things that needed to be done and things that I would endure."

"John has this...he has that luck, it's almost as if he can will things into being or nonbeing. If there is a God or higher power, John fights them for control every day," she laughed.

"That truly is something remarkable about him. He always was different from the rest of us."

"I saw that, that's why I picked him," reminded Cortana. Kelly nodded remembering that part of Cortana's story. Kelly looked down at her daughter.

"I was afraid I wouldn't know how to love her-I had to learn to love Fred, I had to learn to love myself. But when I saw her, when I held her to my breast and looked upon her perfect face for the first time, I knew that I had found the answer to everything I've been struggling with. While I will always be a Spartan, she made me into a mother, something outside of myself and in some ways greater than anything I could've ever been as a Spartan. I took care of her while she grew inside of me and now I have been entrusted with her care forever. She is the tangible evidence that I can be something besides a soldier. It is very humbling," Sam reached up to grab her mother's finger and smiled up at her.

"I understand that. I felt scared initially because I've never been a child or even a baby, how could I take care of her? It has been surprisingly intuitive. I find myself shocked constantly at how good John is with her, she loves him. She cries whenever he leaves," she chuckled a little.

"What are you planning on doing with her when your maternity leave is over?"

"Fred can watch her a bit but I'm going to have to put her in child care some of the day," she said.

Cortana thought about this. That seemed a little silly when either she or John was already watching a baby. "Why don't you just bring her over here when Fred can't watch her, either me or John will be free and we already have Joan so it's not like you're strapping us with this huge extra burden."

"You would really do that? It'd be really helpful, Fred's schedule isn't set so it wouldn't be consistent but it would be really nice to not worry about her. Do you think John will mind?"

Cortana scoffed. "No, not at all. He's pretty good with Joan and I'm applying for a few professor positions so he will be taking care of her if I get one of those anyways, Sammy shouldn't be any problem, she's so quiet!"

It was true, even when she cried it was soft, unlike Joan. When Joan was unhappy, she made sure the entire world knew it.

Over the next few weeks, they fell into a routine. John would take care of Joan in the morning, taking her wherever he ended up going, be it outside for walks or staying inside while he read and Cortana did research in her office, coming in to feed her and spend time with the both of them. Fred would drop Sam off at varying times, depending on his schedule and Kelly would pick her up when she was done with track practice.

John attacked fatherhood with the same determination he did everything. He read as much as he possibly could about what was definitively good for babies and their development. He adhered to it for both Joan and Sam. Cortana was applying for work at various institutions and working on an article she wanted to have published so he found himself taking care of the girls most of the time.

They were very good. It was fun when they started to play with the various toys they had. They were both fascinated with the orb the Arbiter had given to him for Joan, shaking it about and laughing at what appeared to be absolutely nothing.

John found himself doing silly things he had read about. Joan was sitting up and playing with various toys. He sat down by her and she looked up at him, showing him a huge gummy smile. One of her toys had a mirror and he put it in front of her.

"Who's that?" he asked. He found himself shocked at how he felt this need to speak in such a silly manner to her. "That's Joan," he said smiling. She started to get excited and hit at the mirror while laughing loudly as he reaffirmed to her that she was, indeed, looking at herself. Apparently that was an important milestone for babies. John had read that you should talk children through various actions so they got used to language and voices.

He took her toy airplane and started to buzz it around her. He watched her eyes follow the plane as he moved it.

"Oh no we're going to crash," he whispered to her while he made the plane nose dive to the floor, complete with an explosion noise. She started to giggle.

"Not very nice to laugh at a plane crash," he joked. She started to giggle even more at the sound of his voice. He smiled.

"Oh, you're just laughing at daddy then, is that right?"

She continued to giggle madly when he picked her up quickly and lifted her above his head. She kicked her legs excitedly as he lifted her up and down. When he stopped he held her close to his chest and she reached forward to his face and grabbed his nose.

"Yes Joan, that is my nose," he said calmly as she continued to touch his face and moving on to his short hair and pulling at it.

Joan did most things more quickly than Sam did-she sat up sooner, she started playing sooner, she started babbling sooner, before he knew it, she was running around. She hardly seemed to have walked, John remembered he and Cortana had been sitting in the living room in the evening. Joan was laid on the floor, looking at a toy. John watched her walk up and run to the couch, as if she had just on a whim decided to do so.

She babbled sillily and pat at his shins. He could tell she wanted to get up and sit on his lap.

"Do you want to come up here?" he asked. She didn't answer but he saw a flash of understanding in her eyes. He picked her up under her arms and she giggled as he set her down on his lap.

Cortana couldn't believe it. There had been no wobble in her step, no tentative nature, she had simply got up and ran to her father.

"Good job Joan, you're such a big girl," was all she could say, leaning over and kissing her on her temple. Joan giggled happily at the praise.

John found themselves in a similar situation that evening. She snuggled into her father's chest. She stuck her thumb in her mouth and started to sleep while John and Cortana watched the news.

"She's already so big," said Cortana, smoothing her hair. Her first birthday had come and went and she was already wearing clothes for two year olds. Sam was probably tall for her age of one year but she looked very small in comparison to Joan.

John and Cortana went up to Joan's room and put her in her bed, Cortana kissing her goodnight as she continued to sleep. They quietly walked downstairs.

"So I interviewed for the position at Columbia today," she said while she changed into her pajamas.

"How did it go?"

Cortana smiled a little bashfully. He knew that face. She was often cocky in practice but when it came to actually talking about herself

she was easily embarrassed.

"They hired me on the spot."

"They would be foolish not to," he said succinctly. She was the most brilliant person he had ever known, he couldn't imagine any reason why someone wouldn't hire her especially now that she had a service record that documented exactly how brilliant she was. "What did you tell them?"

"I told them I'd get back to them in a few days," she said sitting herself down on their bed and adjusting their baby monitor.

He looked at her and thought she looked a little anxious. She sighed.

"I wanted to talk to you about it first," she said.

"If working would make you happy I want you to work." It was simple to him. If she wanted to work and do research he wanted her to do that. If it wouldn't make her happy, he didn't want her to do it.

"It's a correspondence position, so I would eventually teach from the office we set up above your shop, two classes a semester with research duties and office hours. Because it's a correspondence position they mostly want me to be the point of contact for the outer colonies and do recruitment, look for high schoolers qualified for their full tuition scholarships reserved for citizens of the outer colonies, do interviews and ultimately select recipients. They get more government funding if they have students from the outer colonies attend school on Earth, they're trying to bridge the gap that exists."

It was an interesting concept to John. He knew that the disconnect between Earth and the colonies was a big problem and the notion of having students attend college on Earth seemed to help provide solutions. It would, theoretically, have students attend college then go home to their respective systems and bring knowledge to help advance the entire galaxy. He knew Cortana would be excellent at this kind of job, but she seemed hesitant.

"If I take the job, they want to pay for me to do a residency on Earth for a year so I know the University, its programs and the student body."

That was what was holding her up. "I don't know if Joan could come with for a slipspace jump that long," was all he said.

"Actually, the work I've done over the past two years has contributed largely to effective slipspace travel that wouldn't even require cryosleep for a commercial vessel heading to Earth," she said sheepishly.

John was confused now. "So what's the problem?"

She looked a little surprised. "I mean, we have a life here, we have Kelly and Fred and a home here."

"We could still communicate with them regularly. Perhaps take trips

home when you're not working."

"I just never thought that you'd _want _to go Earth for a year-it's so busy and crowded, it's just not really your style," she said quietly.

He was a little perplexed. He didn't understand how she didn't realize that all he really cared about, when everything was said and done, was being with her and Joan. Everything else was arbitrary.

"I don't care _where_ we are or _what _we are doing. As long as I have you and Joan safe and sound nothing else matters."

She opened her mouth to speak but paused. "So I should take the job."

"If you _want _to take the job then you should take the job," he confirmed.

She smiled widely. "This is so exciting!" She hadn't thought that she'd be able to take the position. Leaving had initially been nerve wracking but now it was exciting. She was going to be a Professor.

"I don't have a real last name," she frowned.

John hadn't thought about this. Neither she, Joan or himself had a last name.

"Your diploma says Halsey," he said. She frowned more.

"I can't have my entire academic career with her name, she's famous and the entire academic community will think every accomplishment of mine got published largely through nepotism."

"Couldn't we just...pick something?" he questioned.

Cortana looked down awkwardly. He could tell she was thinking about something she deemed uncomfortable. Reading her facial expressions was second nature to him. He waited. If she felt like saying something, she would.

"You have a last name," she said quietly.

He froze. He had never thought of it, the fact that he had been born with a last name. Born into a family, perhaps not much unlike the one he had now.

"Do you know it?" he spoke quietly.

She nodded slowly.

He had no idea why his heart started to race. He had no idea why a name, something so simple could have this kind of effect on him. He had never thought of his past, of anything besides being a Spartan.

Having a daughter had changed that. He thought of his sleeping daughter. Her laugh, her smile, her bright blue eyes and her rosy freckled cheeks. She was a part of him. He knew that if something

happened to her that it would change him. He would be ruined. He didn't know how he would survive. He hadn't been able to withstand losing her mother, but he had gotten her back.

He felt a sense of resolve overcome him.

"What is it?"

* * *

><p>Oooh, I think this is my first really evil cliffhanger, I hope you enjoy it!<p>

18. Chapter 18

Okay, I'm about to drop a bomb on y'all this chapter so bear with me. It's a little shorter than usual because it's a bit of a transition chapter, next chapter will be a lot longer I promise! Just bear in mind that this is an extreme AU so I can kinda do what I want...and you all seem to like it thus far so trust me! Haha. I just want to thank all of you for reading and reviewing. All of you anonymous folk, thank you so much for reviewing, I feel badly that I can't give each of you direct review replies, you're wonderful! Since this chapter is a little transition-ish, bringing us into an arc where we are really dealing with character development and just some kinda exciting stuff. :) I hope you all enjoy, I really, really appreciate that you guys have enjoyed this story like I have. I write it to make me happy and I'm glad I can make you guys happy!

* * *

><p>"Black," she spoke. She was direct. She didn't mumble nor did she proclaim, it was firm, almost as if she had to find the nerve to say it.<p>

John ran it through his head a few times. John Black, Black John. It was strange. It wasn't 117, it wasn't Master Chief, both monikers he had learned to associate with himself. John had been difficult enough, it had only been reserved for Cortana and Dr. Halsey. He hadn't referred to himself as John until Cortana had died. The way she had said his name above the Earth had been like a prayer, she had considered his name sacred, she held it dear to her. He had never felt that kind of connection to an identity until he had heard it from her lips when she said goodbye, when she had said her final blessing: "Welcome home, John." In a moment, he had been remade as _John_. Ever since then, he has been _John_. John the Spartan, John the soldier and John the man became one. Because she had needed him to. Because he had needed to.

He tried to glean as much as he could from it-where on Earth had his family come from with that surname, it was generic and didn't reveal much to him, much like his own first name. It wasn't like Jorge, who had known he was from Reach, had been raised by Reach and in his death, returned to Reach. He and a few other Spartans like Fahjad had spoken other languages as a mother tongue that, into adulthood, had given them at least a ghost of an insight of where they could've originated if they thought of it. Black provided no such information-it could be anything.

"What else do you know," he said clearly.

She sighed. "Everything. I know everything. It was one of the first things I did after we met, I had to access so much Top Secret data that I probably should've been deactivated on the spot. I had to know. I had to know everything about you. I swore to protect you."

This was it. This was the moment he didn't know he had been waiting for. In some ways his life had probably been leading up to this moment, this moment of reckoning.

"Tell me."

"Your family immigrated from the United Northern America to the colonies shortly after the advent of faster than light travel. You're predominantly Anglo-Saxon and Germanic muddled with varying percentages of other western European groups," she inhaled deeply and started to speak even more quickly.

"Your parents were both born on Eridanus II. Your mother's name was Amelia, your father's name was John Thomas Black and he is your namesake; you share his middle name as well. Your father was a military man, he was enlisted and was in charge of weapons systems on specific carriers. He enlisted when your mother got pregnant with you unexpectedly when she was nineteen. Your mother had been a promising athlete being looked at for scholarship selection before she got pregnant. You had a sister younger than you named Emily. Your father was killed when the ship he was serving on was destroyed by early Covenant attacks. Your mother died as a civilian casualty when Eridanus II was glassed."

"...What about my sister?" he asked. If he had been a different man, his voice would've shook.

Cortana started to cry, her face overcome with grief at this point. She felt so guilty, it was a guilt she shouldn't have inherited, it hadn't been her fault but it was a guilt somehow ingrained in her, a guilt she knew stemmed from Catherine. It made her both pity the woman and detest her—"how she had gone through with what she had and continued to live with guilt crippling enough to span mind and body was nothing short of astounding.

"Catherine had selected her to become a part of the next class of Spartan-IIs, she had genetic markers that made her an optimal candidate, like you did. When your parents died and she was orphaned, she was conscripted into the Spartan-III program and became Spartan-B312. She is the only Spartan to have _ever_ come close to your reputation and skill. As a part of Noble team she enabled us to escape on the _Pillar of Autumn_ and ultimately end the Human-Covenant war," she said shakily. She wrung her hands. Her face had drained of all color as tears rolled down her cheeks. This truth had weighed on her. This truth had been difficult to keep secret and difficult to carry.

He had heard of this Spartan. He had known that this Spartan was the only other one to have been as lethal as he in combat. It was amazing that his own flesh and blood was all that matched him. They had both saved the human race from certain destruction.

John couldn't help but think it was fitting. It was difficult. She had died the way he had expected to die, in the line of duty. He couldn't help but feel that it was the way he was supposed to have died. It was the way he would have died had Cortana not saved him when he had detonated the nuke-with little concern for himself, all concern for mankind and with no glory or recognition.

His sister had died his death for him. It moved him. Somehow, some way, he connected with the sister he had never known, the sister who had lived a life parallel to his own. He could envision her, he could feel deep within himself that he knew her, that she was somehow a part of him. Her legacy, her life and death were now a piece of his own destiny.

He knew he could accept his name now. He could be John Black. For her he could do this. She had died his death, and he was going to live their lives, the lives that both of them never had had a chance of living.

Cortana composed herself quickly and put her hand on his shoulder. "John," she whispered, trying to soothe him. His face was blank, she could hardly tell what he was thinking and that always scared her—"she was supposed to know what he was thinking, constantly. She wanted to disappear, she wanted to know without a doubt that he was okay and she couldn't.

"I'm fine," he said.

"It's okay if you aren't," she said softly, smoothing her hand over his shoulder blade.

"It's just...a lot. A lot to think about."

"I understand."

He sighed. "Thank you," he said softly.

She smiled, "Of course."

They laid down and she turned off their lights. It was him who reached out to her. He pulled her close to him and wrapped his arms around her. He rested his head on her shoulder and inhaled deeply, then sighed. She snuggled closer to him and grasped his hand.

"I like the name," he said quietly.

"I can start the work changing it tomorrow for you, Joan and myself then," she replied.

She felt him nod on her shoulder. She could tell it was hard for him, hearing what she had had to say. He sought comfort in physical action. Her presence and warmth was what he needed.

He felt an odd sense of peace overcome him. Cortana heard his breathing even out as he fell asleep. She stayed awake thinking of John's parents and their grief they must have felt when their little boy died. She liked to think that his parents might have been proud of their children had they known. The idea of a legacy was foreign to her, but after having a child, having very real evidence of her time in this world, it was easier for her to understand. She was gladdened

that John would accept the name he had been born with. She knew the terrible, unspeakable things that she knew had happened to John, even if he didn't know or really remember them. She wondered if she would ever be able to tell him all she knew and the pain it had caused her to know.

She would work to do well by the name that was taken from him.

* * *

><p>Packing was simple. There weren't many things they needed that were worth bringing instead of just buying on Earth.<p>

On the eve of their departure, they invited Kelly and Fred over for dinner. Kelly seemed particularly saddened; she had grown very attached to seeing both of them.

"It's going to be fun, when you have a break from school you can come and visit, see some of the sights on Earth, and Sam can come with isn't that right Sam," Cortana spoke excitedly. Sam, knowing that she was being addressed, looked away bashfully. She was turning out to be quiet like her father. Kelly said that sometimes she spoke a few words but it was very seldom.

Joan, however, could hardly be silenced.

"Ma ma ma ma ma ma ma," she said while she smeared her dinner over her tray and on her cheeks. Cortana sighed.

"Yes dear, you're making a mess, great work," she said sardonically.

"Joan," she immediately stopped what she was doing and looked at her father. "You should eat your food, watch how daddy does it," John coached. He looked at her and demonstrated. She watched him eat for a moment then started giggling but actually ate some of her food instead of plastering it to herself and her chair.

"How do you get her to do that?" Cortana groaned.

"She and I have an understanding," he said dryly.

Cortana rolled her eyes. Sam had clearly lost interest in her food and started to whine and reach for her mother. Kelly sighed and reached over and lifted her out of the chair, snuggling her to her while she finished her food.

After John had given Joan a quick bath, an event that seemed to be a constant theme of dinner time, they set up the portable crib Kelly and Fred had brought.

They put both of the girls in John and Cortana's room. They were quickly asleep and the adults sat in the living room, Cortana a little more weary than she usually was.

"I think she's getting sick," said Fred to Kelly.

Kelly nodded. "She's not really herself lately, she's more clingy. I'll take her into the doctor tomorrow if she seems worse."

Cortana opened a bottle of wine and poured all of them glasses.

"I can't believe that you're leaving," said Kelly sadly.

"We can talk all the time and you two are going to visit at least once, it's only a year, it'll go quickly!" said Cortana brightly. Truth be told, she was saddened to leave them. They were both wonderful people and they had formed a family together.

"Where are you going to stay?" questioned Kelly.

"Columbia has rented an apartment for us for the year, furnished and everything. I made a couple specifications so John's feet won't hang off the bed because I know he hates that, but I bet the dining room set will be useless," she laughed and John sighed. It was extremely frustrating for him.

They continued to talk about mundane things and John couldn't help but feel a little restless.

"Have either of you looked at your files?" he asked directly. Since hearing information from Cortana, it had opened up a world of questions. The prospect of going to Earth where all of his information could be made available to him made him even more both knew what he was referring to, the files from before they were Spartans.

"No." both of them said shortly.

"Have you?" questioned Kelly.

He folded his hands and rested his chin on his knuckles. "Cortana needed a last name for work, mostly for publishing purposes, and she told me some of the basics."

Cortana felt saddened by his tone. He had been more quiet than usual the weeks following the information she gave him. She knew that was his way of processing most things, he reflected inwards, he ran outside, he held her a little closer.

Kelly didn't know what to say. She wanted to ask him what he found but didn't know if it was too personal. His birth family could have been anyone. They could've been insurrectionists, researchers, military personnel, school teachers, lawyers or drunks. It was intensely personal.

"I had a sister who was a Spartan-III," he said quietly.

Kelly remembered her little family of Spartan-IIIs on Onyx-they were all that really remained of them.

"Do you know what company she was in?" She asked softly. _Knowing how she had died may be helpful in this process_. she thought to herself.

"She was on Noble team," he said tonelessly.

Kelly gasped a little, Fred's eyes widened. Fred processed this information. John was the best Spartan, statistically it just came down to that. A Spartan on Noble Team had been the only one close to

the Master Chief's prowess, something he had found out with a few years in command and access to as many mission briefs as he wanted.

"That makes a lot of sense," he said softly.

"What of your parents and your life before you were taken?" said Kelly quietly. She used the word _taken_ instead of conscripted. It was unusual.

"I know their names and what they did. Superficial details," he said quietly. He didn't know what his life had been like before. It nagged at him since Cortana had told him the surface details but for the first time in a long time, he felt afraid. Afraid to learn more.

"Are you going to find more?" Kelly asked. She couldn't help but curious. Part of her had always wanted to know what she might have been and another part of her wanted to pretend she could never have lived anything besides this destiny and this life.

He rested his head in his hand and shrugged.

"I don't know. I don't know the right thing to do," he said quietly. It was awkward. It was uncomfortable. He always knew what to do. Until now.

Cortana frowned. She had never seen him like this. The past few months he seemed fine but little things would tell her that he had been somewhat off. She recalled that he had accidentally broken a vase on their coffee table last week when he had turned too quickly. She had never seen him do something like that, so graceless and so uncontrolled, like he hadn't really been thinking.

"Let me know when you _do_ know the right thing," said Kelly solemnly. She didn't know the answer to that question. She had not known what to do. Adapting to civilian life had been a challenge enough living in the present instead of the past.

Fred went into the bedroom and picked up his daughter who continued to sleep peacefully, resting on his shoulder.

"We will come and see you all off tomorrow," said Kelly getting up and putting on her coat.

Cortana didn't really know what to say to him. She knew what had happened to him in its entirety-she had watched hours of video, all of John Black becoming John-117. She didn't know how he would react. She didn't know how she was supposed to feel about it. All she knew was it why she had sworn herself to him, why she had promised to never let him suffer again. She had kept to that promise well.

She didn't offer him any words. This was a journey he would have to take alone and if he felt like talking to her about it he would. If he didn't, that was fine too.

* * *

><p>OKAY. I know that canon wise, Noble-six is a dude. But I want another badass lady Spartan in the picture, and something just

speaks to me. When I wrote this (like, MONTHS ago,) I went through and really checked timelines and it's an entirely possible scenario and I can't help but feel there are SO many parallels! I always think of Ackerson saying "There are bound to some that _she _[Halsey] would have picked..." and Six is one of those.

I like the idea of John's birth parents being very obviously gifted people who were kind of brought down by circumstance and never achieved their full potential. I think it's symptomatic of what a lot of the people in the Outer Colonies endured, they have much less opportunities and Eridanus-II was a hotbed for insurrection. I think the irony in them not achieving their full potential lies in their son, and also daughter, achieving the height of human excellence.

I chose Black because it was a strong, simple, generic name. I imagine John being from The US (way back before his family migrated to the outer colonies,) not because I'm a douchey American but because of his lack of accent mostly. I'm imagining him being something of an East coast wasp revolutionary war type of family. I don't think the US exists in the Halo universe like it does today so I tried to be somewhat vague (didn't wanna make a blatant mistake in that, haha, I'm a little neurotic.)

I know that people can make up their own past about John and whatnot and that's part of the fun but this is my own fun take on it. I hope no one finds it offensive-I know John's past is kind of hallowed ground for us Halo fans, I've felt quite anxious about posting something like this. Even I feel a little odd about clearing the air when it comes to our hero-the mystery is just so integral to him! But this story is fun and not about a Hero journey but John's journey, so I feel that this is an important step.

For those of you that kept reading this author's note, kudos to you, haha! See you guys next time-I'll have my degree by then! :D

19. Chapter 19

Hey all, hope you're well! This is a fun chapter, I really like this arc of the story we are entering. (it also means that i need to get writing because the amount I've written ahead for this story is becoming less and less-have a lot planned just gotta put it down...lol!) Thank you all so much for the kind reviews, they really keep me going, you're phenomenal!

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><p>It was early that morning when they went to the port. Joan was cranky and fussed the whole way. Cortana frustratedly handed her a toy that momentarily soothed her until she dropped it on the floor and started to wail.<p>

She continued to cry the whole way and Cortana knew that it was setting the tone for the rest of their day.

She fussed while they tried to say goodbye to Kelly and Fred. Kelly, who was particularly forlorn, looked ready to cry as she kissed Joan on her head.

"We will contact you when we get there," said Cortana embracing Kelly

tightly. Kelly nodded.

"Be safe, please," she said. She worried about them. She didn't want them to go but knew it would be good for them.

"Joan say goodbye to auntie Kelly, uncle Fred, and Sammy," Cortana said. Joan buried her face in her shoulder and started crying. Cortana groaned. "I'm sorry, I don't think she slept well or something, she's just not in a good mood."

"It's okay we understand," she said looking over at Samantha who was sleeping rather soundly in her Father's arms. Truth be told, Sam had never thrown a tantrum, she was very quiet and well behaved.

Kelly hugged John tightly. It was hard for her to say goodbye to him. She should have been used to saying goodbye to people but this was difficult for her-they had created a life here and started raising children together, she couldn't imagine her life without seeing them every day.

Kelly and Fred left when they went to go board. John had never traveled on a commercial vessel and it was different from the military fare he was used to. The voyage was supposed to take only a few days. John couldn't believe it. Only six years ago, they would have had to be in cryo for months to make a jump that far, and that's only if the jump had been done correctly. Now cryo-sleep wasn't even necessary. Whatever company made cytoprethaline must've been cursing Cortana's name. He knew that she was brilliant, a genius in every sense of the word, but when she did things like completely revolutionize interstellar travel he was reminded of exactly how brilliant she was.

"I want to go to the bridge when they make the jump, I designed the engines on this vessel and I've never seen them work." A company had paid her for the rights to use her work but she was still getting huge royalties. Oddly enough they would easily be the wealthiest family on their planet sooner rather than later, the outer colonies didn't attract much wealth.

Cortana set Joan down to walk beside them and she immediately went to her father and demanded: "Up."

"No, you should walk like a big girl," Cortana said. Despite her words, she watched John pick her up. She frowned.

"John you can't do that, she won't listen to me if you just give her what she wants when I tell her no."

John knew she was right. He knew he should set her down and make her walk but she was upset all morning and he liked carrying her.

"She's not going to be little enough for me to carry her like this much longer," he said quietly, smoothing Joan's hair down. She was growing quickly, in another year or so she would be too big for him to carry her everywhere without it being silly. She was already a bit heavy for Cortana to carry for extended periods of time and she was two. Joan smiled and pressed a kiss on his cheek, her new favorite activity.

Cortana felt her heart clench a little bit. As much as she was

annoyed, the way John treated their daughter made her happy. If he wanted to carry her she couldn't deny him the experience.

"When we have the most spoiled child in the galaxy it's not my fault," she said. John knew she was joking and he smiled a little.

"I love Dada best," Joan said pointedly. Cortana started laughing at her attempt to be sassy. They were very similar in some ways.

"You mean that you love Dada most," John corrected calmly, though he couldn't help but feel flattered. "You need to be nice to your mother though, we're going to go see the engine she made do its job. It's very important that you're an extremely well behaved big girl, the bridge of a ship is for big girls, can you do that?" he asked. She stuck her thumb in her mouth and nodded quickly.

The door to the bridge was being guarded by a man in a uniform. He looked up at John and clearly was a little unnerved.

"We would like to be on the bridge for the slipspace jump," said Cortana.

"We don't allow passengers to access the bridge, you should be able to see something on the observation deck," he said stiffly.

Cortana crossed her arms. John was curious what she was going to say, she looked irritated.

"What's the name of the operating system on this vessel," she questioned.

"The engine is cutting edge technology, it's called a Black Hyperlight Acceleration Engine," he said proudly.

"Hmm, do you know who invented this new cutting edge technology?"

John held back a sigh. She was being very mean, the man was just trying to do his job.

"A physicist in the outer colonies," he responded.

"And we are leaving a planet in the outer colonies," she mused. The guard was starting to look confused. "And funnily enough, my name is Cortana Black, and I invented all of the technology on this vessel. If you could please ask your Captain permission for me to come on deck so I can see my own engine do a slipspace jump, I would be much obliged."

He looked a little flustered as he called the Captain to come out and speak to them.

The Captain seemed even more flustered when Cortana introduced herself, glaring slightly at the guard as he ushered them onto the bridge.

Joan looked completely awestruck seeing the stars and planet, exclaiming "Wow!" very loudly as she pointed outwards.

"I know," John whispered to her. "See, that's where we live and we're taking a trip for a while," he explained.

"It's an absolute honor to have you here Dr. Black," the Captain said.

"Call me Cortana. It's wonderful to finally be able to see my work, this is my husband and my daughter," she gestured toward them. The Captain looked at him and seemed almost scared of him. Sometimes he forgot how shocking his appearance was. The scars that crept up his arms were very clearly surgical and looked particularly startling. He knew that aside from his height and his unique looking eyes they were a very clear marker of his status as a Spartan class II; the Spartan-IVs all looked relatively normal aside from being muscular and taller than average. He still had no idea how he could still look intimidating while he held his daughter, who was currently gesturing excitedly at every satellite and object in the vicinity of their planet.

"What sends your family to Earth?" he questioned to Cortana.

"I'm going to be a professor at Columbia University and I'm doing a year long residency on Earth before we move back here for me to continue their outreach in the outer colonies," she replied, looking around at the ship's interfaces. It was strange for John to not see an AI on the bridge-civilian vessels must not be as complex without weapons systems and various other accouterments that accompanied a UNSC fleet. AI were also considered priceless and he doubted any civilian company could not only afford to make them but get the clearance to do so.

"We're going to make the jump in about five minutes, have either of you traveled in slipspace before?"

Cortana chuckled. "We were both in the UNSC, I don't even want to think about how many years John has spent in cryosleep, that's a big reason I put so much effort into this project. I worked the bridge so I know everything that happens, which is why I'm so excited to see the jump, I know what it should look like but I want to see it myself. It's our little girl's first slipspace jump and first time in a big ship isn't it Joan?"

She smiled but didn't seem to really understand what Cortana was saying.

"This is your first time going on a trip like this, right Joan?" John rephrased. She clapped her hands together happily.

"It's Mama's!" she proclaimed excitedly and the Captain smiled softly, clearly unable to deny how adorable she was. Cortana felt glad that she understood the idea in some capacity.

"How old are you?" he asked to Joan. Joan looked at him warily, frowning. She sometimes didn't care for strangers. She had a very impressive frown. Cortana started to laugh.

"She's two and a half," said Cortana.

"She seems so much older, at least a year older than that!" he exclaimed.

Cortana and John looked at each other. They knew she was much more advanced than most one and a half year olds. It was a little disconcerting. They couldn't tell if she was just smart or if she was actually developing faster physically. Perhaps both.

An automated voice went over the ship's loud system to welcome the passengers and announced that the slipspace event would occur in the next minute. Cortana radiated anticipation. John was happy to see her so excited about her work.

The Captain and crew started preparing the necessary sequences to initiate the jump. John heard a very quiet hum of what he assumed was the engine starting to cycle; he didn't think anyone else could hear it until Joan looked at him "Dada, what that?"

Cortana looked at Joan, "What's what sweetheart?" she questioned.

John smiled softly. "She can hear the engine cycling like I can."

Cortana smiled and shook her head. "Of course I couldn't make an engine so quiet Spartan hearing wouldn't pick it up, to us mere mortals it's pretty damn silent," she jokingly fumed.

It was faster than anything John had experienced-he had only seen slipspace ruptures from afar because he never was on the bridge during deep space travel, but UNSC ships had always looked slow in comparison to what was occurring now. The vessel's shock systems took away any of the sling-shot feeling that should've went with the movement. Blue light pulsed quickly through the entire ship and then the world outside the vessel was black.

Cortana smiled. She should be extremely proud.

"That looked likeâ€|"

"Like the Prometheans?" she said wryly. He could tell she was feeling very accomplished and rather confident, he couldn't help but find it attractive. She talked for a brief period with the Captain and wished him well, thanking him for allowing her to see the jump. They walked back to their cabin which was rather nice, it had a large bed, a small bathroom and a living area. They set up their portable crib and John laid Joan down for a nap. She was getting crabby again and there had been a lot of excitement this morning.

They were silent for a solid half hour to make sure that Joan was really asleep.

"She is growing quickly," said Cortana softly. John tensed up. It was hard for him, he felt like just yesterday she had been a tiny baby and last week he had taken her to get her first hair cut. She was close to speaking in full sentences and understood most things, even if she didn't respond.

"I don't want her to," he said quietly. Cortana leaned on his shoulder. She really loved being a mother but she did sometimes miss the alone time that childless life had afforded them. She was surprised at how rewarding raising a child had been, however. She

loved seeing Joan grow and play, she was very creative.

"She looks so much like you," smiled Cortana. Her hair had gotten redder than John's but was a bit deeper in color, more of an auburn whereas John's hair was a light reddish brown. Her eyes were a dark, almost navy blue and she was pale with more freckles than John. Cortana remembered photos and knew that John had had more freckles like that as a child.

Joan sucked her thumb in her sleep. Cortana had thought about trying to break the habit but figured if her father could become a Spartan and suck his thumb well past six then Joan would probably survive. She also knew her daughter and knew how obstinate she was-it wasn't worth the trauma.

"She has your personality." He loved that about Joan, he could already tell she was very much like her mother. She would give him these looks where he could just tell she was smarting off in her head about something, even if she wasn't saying it. She was going to be a real handful as she got older. She was a lot like him in the way she tore everything apart-she knocked down chairs and basically anything she could get her hands on. John had worked relentlessly to break her habit of throwing her toys-she would whip them across the room with surprising strength and had once hit him in the head leaving quite the bruise. John had very few childhood memories but he thought that that was probably something he would have done.

He didn't know what Earth was going to bring for himself and his small family, but he knew that things were going to change again.

When they finally arrived in New York City, all of them felt somewhat exhausted. Even John had to acknowledge that while he himself would have been fine carrying all of their things and taking an interstellar voyage, doing it with a two year old was less than amusing.

By the time they boarded the train to New York Joan had collapsed into an inconsolable tantrum. Cortana tried to carry her but she had thrashed her arms incessantly screaming "No!" until John took her and tried to manage her while she kicked and screamed. She didn't even calm down for him like she normally would. She was very clearly emotionally and physically exhausted from the entire ordeal.

John knew she wasn't screaming "No" at anything in particular but he felt that he could truly understand the sentiment-no, no, no was all he felt, not only about his screaming daughter but the busy city they found themselves in. Everything was oddly overwhelming. There was chaos with no real focal point, bright lights, fast moving cars, people bumping into him as they walked-it was unlike anything he had ever experienced.

When they took the entirely glass elevator up to the apartment they were staying in, Cortana gasped.

"This is unreal," she said, looking at what couldn't be described as anything other than a luxury apartment. The light fixtures were beautiful, there was a balcony with a lap pool and extremely fine furnishings.

John was amazed by the amount of bathrooms, there were four along with five bedrooms and two offices. He had no idea how someone could rationalize giving two adults and a toddler this much space to live in-he was going to have to block off a large portion of the house so he would be able to even keep track of Joan, let alone prevent her from breaking everything she was curious about.

She had finally exhausted herself in her tantrum and Cortana sighed, putting her into the rather plush, tiny bed that had been provided for her. She shut the door hurriedly and rubbed her temples.

"When we go home I'm drugging her I swear," she said exasperatedly to John, going into the kitchen and pouring herself a tumbler of what he assumed was a hard liquor-the kitchen was already stocked with more niceties than they would've been able to fathom on an outer colony planet.

He went and looked into the cabinet, examining all of the fine bottles. He couldn't help but feel he could use a stiff drink as well, something he very seldom desired. He didn't like anything that greatly impaired his judgement or abilities, it made him uncomfortable but he felt that he could stand to be a little less hyper-aware at the moment. He normally had an extreme amount of patience but even he had been tested by Joan on the last few days of their voyage.

"I think she has an ear infection, she wasn't able to walk straight yesterday and she felt warm, I'll pick up a diagnostic kit and some antibiotics after we've settled in," said Cortana taking a swig of her drink.

John examined a brown liquor in what appeared to be an extremely expensive bottle and poured himself a generous serving. Cortana started laughing.

"Oh so even the patron saint Daddy needs a drink after that?" She teased.

"Our daughter is extraordinary in many ways, very notably she is extremely advanced when it comes to communicating her displeasure, I think my ears are ringing," he commented.

"Cheers to that," she groaned. They went to go sit in what was apparently a sitting room completely separate from their television room. The couch was a little small for John's taste, his head clearing the top of it by about a foot, but at least it didn't buckle under his weight.

There was a large glass wall not unlike the one they had had in the resort they'd stayed at on their honeymoon. One could press a button and it would become opaque or transparent. They could see tall buildings and countless cars and lights as the sun set over the city, nothing seemed to slow down.

"Quite the view," said Cortana.

John had never seen anything like it-he had seen the Earth from above and that was amazing, he had traveled space but something about being in such a populated, established place was entirely foreign to him. Almost everything in his life up until a few years ago had been

entirely transient, completely temporary. This city had stood for hundreds of years, changing and breathing with the people in it. It felt alive to him somehow. It was inspiring yet overwhelming-he didn't know how to relax in an environment like this.

"I have three days to settle before they want me to come to the University and start working. Within that timeframe we need to settle in, buy the essentials for Joan in addition to anything she might want to entertain herself so she's not driving you up a wall. I also need to buy a professional wardrobe, I'd like it if you came with," she said thoughtfully.

"Why do you want me with?" He didn't understand, he'd have to bring Joan and it would probably end up being an ordeal.

"I think you need to dive headfirst into this city and I of course want your fashion advice," she said dryly.

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. His clothing consisted of t-shirts, jeans, utility pants, sneakers and the occasional hat with a jacket for when the weather required it.

Cortana laughed at his expression. "In all honesty I think you should probably get at least two outfits that are a little more formal-I don't know what kind of events we might end up attending and it would just be good for you to have as much as I know the idea revolts you. I also would like it if I picked out clothes you liked," she said.

"You know I don't really pay much attention to what you wear," he said.

"You say that but I can tell when you like something I'm wearing, you might not acknowledge it but a girl can tell," she said finishing her drink. "The funny thing about outfits you like is that I rather quickly find myself not wearing them anymore," she laughed.

John thought about a specific grey skirt that hit her knee and the pinstriped button up she wore with it. She had a point, now that he thought about it.

"I'm still thinking of that floral button up you ruined, rest in peace floral button up," she said dramatically. "I digress, I figure if we're going to spend money on clothes we should do it right and where else better than New York City, they'll be much more experienced at customizing clothes for you here than you're used to at home," she said.

He had never thought about this. Part of the reason he detested shopping for almost anything was how much it needed to be specialized for him, it made him feel awkward.

"Let's go to bed, even you must be exhausted," she said.

He finished his drink, savoring the aromatic sensation it provided. It was nicer than anything he'd ever drank. He felt a nice warmth settle in his chest which for him was a rare occasion, especially now that both he and Kelly, the main person he drank with, had small children who demanded their full attention.

Joan woke them up early that morning crying. Cortana threw on a cardigan and some pants to go get a pediatric diagnostic kit. She had this way of walking about in the morning that made it look like she wasn't really awake, he oftentimes caught her running into objects when she was woken up suddenly. She nearly forgot her wallet three times before John simply had taken it and placed it in her hand as she stepped out the door.

"Dada," Joan lamented as she cried, her lip quivering with big tears streaming down her cheeks. John could feel that she was most assuredly running a fever, it was no wonder she was so upset.

"Your mother is getting you medicine to make you feel all better," he comforted. He felt that it was necessary to explain to her that they were going to take care of her. She sucked on her thumb and buried her head in his shoulder as she continued to whimper in what he now recognized was pain. He felt guilty for initially thinking she was simply upset or cranky the day prior-she must really be in pain at this point and he should have spotted it earlier.

She had an ear infection along with a head cold. John held her while Cortana sprayed medicine into her ear. Joan was so exhausted she didn't even struggle at the relatively uncomfortable feeling.

The whole morning John watched her cough and dribble snot while she slept on a blanket. He tried to focus on a menial task like reading or even writing an exercise regimen but he felt too distracted by Joan's fitful sleep. He swaddled her up in the blanket and cradled her on his lap, smoothing his hand over her fevered forehead while she shivered. He wiped her nose and continued to watch her.

Cortana came back from errands with a fair amount of things for Joan ranging from diapers and clothing to toys and a more childproof book tablet.

"Our poor baby, what rotten luck," sighed Cortana. "Medicine should have her feeling better in a few more hours," she said looking at her.

John was surprised that her immune system wasn't better-John had only had a slight cold once in his adult life and he had contracted it on a very remote star system that seemed to be prone to sickness. Perhaps it was something that would improve as she matured but it reminded John that in some ways she wasn't entirely like him.

Cortana studied and wrote in the living room with them as opposed to in the grandiose office that had been provided for her saying that she wanted to be by the both of them instead. John appreciated it. He knew he was going to miss her company while she worked even though he knew she would be happy.

Cortana couldn't help but feel apprehensive about creating lesson plans. She knew that the students she would be teaching were some of the best and brightest the galaxy had to offer but she worried about communicating concepts properly-she had never really had to _learn _anything, at least in the conventional sense. As an AI things had simply been known and unknown, there was hardly an in between. Even as a human she had little to no difficulty understanding almost any concept-anything that took time was always completely uncharted

territory for the human race. She was teaching one introductory course and one advanced course for graduate students and ambitious undergraduates. She hoped she would have a mentor of some kind to talk to her about some of the logistics involved with teaching.

Joan opened her eyes and seemed a great deal better in a few hours. She was still sniffing a little bit but she wasn't feverish or crying out anymore. Cortana set down her work and smiled at her.

"Mama got you some presents while she was out because you weren't feeling well and because we took such a big trip, do you want to go see them?" Cortana asked. Joan nodded and got off of John's lap tossing aside the blanket she had been wrapped up in. John folded it up neatly next to him and laughed at her enthusiasm, of course she was interested in the word present.

Cortana played with her for an hour, showing her how to count the blocks she had gotten her and identify the colors as they changed on the cubes.

"Go get Dad so you can show him all your new stuff," said Cortana. Joan got up excitedly and ran to the living room that she remembered her father was in.

John heard her quick footsteps and her excited declaration of "Dada, dada!"

She grabbed his hand and very obviously tried to pull him off the couch, though this didn't do anything John got up.

"What's got you so excited?" He asked when she lead him to her room. He was impressed that she could already navigate this kind of thing even though it was just down the hallway.

John saw a very large number of toys strewn all over the floor. Cortana was programming the book tablet for Joan so she could page through simple picture booklets.

John let himself be pulled to the floor near a pile of blocks that she began to stack.

"And you say that _I _spoil her," said John, rather astounded at the sheer amount of playthings for one little girl.

"I'll have you know that all of these toys are highly educational and rated to help develop fine motor skills," said Cortana handing him the book tablet. "Besides, all of them were just way too neat to pass up, you wouldn't believe the stuff they have around here, I got her this holopad that teaches her how to make songs and read music by having her slide these little levers, _I _want to play with it it's so neat," she mused.

John couldn't help but smile a little. Cortana had a rather impulsive personality which made her prone to very random outbursts of shopping. He predicted that they would go home from their stay in New York City with a significant amount of purchased 'necessities.'

Cortana set up their comm system and called Fred and Kelly-there was

a bit of a lag since it was so far away and it took a while for a connection to be established.

Joan continued to play happily in the background. Kelly answered and her face lit up when she saw them and she called for Fred.

They talked for a while, Cortana clearly very happy to be speaking with her friend. They talked about the trip and the apartment and how there would be plenty of space for them when they visited.

"Fred has a gallery opening right in New York City in about four months, it's a long trip but we would really like to make it, you're giving us a great excuse to come," she said happily.

"I definitely recommend giving Samantha a sedative, that was a big mistake. Maybe let her look at a few things then just put her out for as much of it as you can, it was miserable, her ears got all infected and she was extremely bothered by a lot of the ambient noise," explained Cortana.

Kelly couldn't help but think that wouldn't be necessary-if everyone was honest it was very clear that Samantha was simply a better behaved, less finicky child. There was nothing wrong with that but it definitely made parenting easier. Kelly recalled the one time she had watched Joan and she couldn't help but wonder how John did it, the girl was exhausting. Samantha was less independent than Joan and overall very mellow in nature. She also knew that Samantha's hearing more than likely wasn't nearly as sensitive as Joan's.

The following days passed by in a blur. They continued to settle into the apartment and Cortana finally got John to go clothes shopping.

The stores were extremely luxurious. She explained that she was looking for a wardrobe befitting a professor and a team had quickly gotten to work putting things together for her. John was particularly fond of a pair of charcoal pants that hugged her just the right way paired with some heeled boots. She bought a few scarves and hats along with a few things for her hair along with a rather smart looking leather bag for her to carry her things in.

Cortana insisted he buy a few sweaters stating that the Winter weather was harsher here than they were used to. He had to admit, he was impressed with the professionalism the employees had displayed, they didn't make any comments about him being difficult to fit or about his appearance. He assumed it was in part because of Earth's familiar and simple relationship with the UNSC-they were probably much more accustomed to things out of the ordinary like himself.

The morning Cortana left for her first day at work, Joan cried, clinging to her. Even though Cortana was gone plenty doing research, she was almost always intermittently home, seeing Joan when she took breaks and during meals. Joan must have somehow sensed that this wasn't the case and was rather clingy about it.

Cortana couldn't help but feel slightly relieved at her daughter's reaction-she knew that Joan was extremely attached to her father, a dependency that he did absolutely nothing to curb. It made her feel good that she would be missed even though she didn't like seeing her upset.

"Mommy goes to work and mommy comes back, it's going to be okay," explained Cortana giving her a kiss on the cheek. "You need to be good for your father, you two are going to have just as much fun as you usually do," she consoled.

Joan proceeded to stick her thumb in her mouth like she usually did when she was distressed. Cortana kissed John on the cheek. "I'll message you at lunch, let you know how everything's going," she said.

"Well you know I'm here for back-up," he said jokingly.

"I'll keep that in mind, I'll assess the threats and let you know on your heads up display," she said, putting on her coat.

"I have a weapons stockpile consisting of kitchen knives, a diaper bag and toys of varying destructive capability to include the dreaded Kelly bunny, I'll be waiting on your signal."

"Make sure you get some fresh air," she smiled opening the door.

"We will be sure to comply," he agreed. Joan whimpered a tiny "Bye-bye," as Cortana left.

John entertained Joan by letting her sit on his back as he did push ups and letting her swing on his legs while he did some leg-lifts. They weren't much, but they actually tired him more than he would think. This was largely because his legs were so heavy due to his carbide reinforced bones and dense muscles in addition to his growing daughter's surprisingly significant weight. He also assumed that the fact that he was getting the least amount of physical activity he'd ever gotten in his life was coming into play-he would always be strong, fit and healthy but he wasn't living in MJOLNIR and neutralizing threats on a day to day basis anymore. He also had to admit that he was indeed aging slightly. That didn't mean much, in fact he felt that he had gotten healthier overall as he relaxed into civilian life, his blood pressure was low and he simply held less stress.

His hair still hardly had any white in it for a man of his age. He supposed he didn't really have an accurate assessment on his age if he considered the years he had spent in cryo. Cortana probably knew a precise figure. Despite that, he knew that he had a few more joints that would pop and a few more chronic muscle aches than he had in the past. The microscopic bits of shrapnel he had embedded in him from his teen years bothered him a little bit more when it rained which was apparently very common.

He heard Joan start playing with some of her toys in her bedroom and stared out at the busy streets below. He couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement at the prospect of new experiences. This was going to be different.

* * *

><p>I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, trying to move it along. :) Thanks again for being great!<p>

20. Chapter 20

Wow, we've finally broke 100 reviews! Thank you all so much, your words are seriously keeping me going! Life has been mega busy with my fiance graduating and starting grad school right after and me interviewing for jobs and moving around, so updates have been hard to squeeze in! But with the announcement of the master chief collection, my Halo love couldn't be stronger! Who else is freakin out!? HAHA! I hope you enjoy this sizable chapter and give me some time to get ahead after this! This is where we start to get into a lot of the character development I keep talking about, I really like this chapter. :)

* * *

><p>Weeks passed in a fashion very similar to this. Cortana eased into work and John eased into a routine of taking Joan out to the park in the morning and staying in after they had gotten lunch. John was surprised how much he enjoyed eating out for lunch-he liked being able to leisurely drink coffee with a newspaper while he ate. Joan was surprisingly good most of the time if he simply explained to her that it was "quiet time for Daddy." She even preferred to mimic him with her own book even if she couldn't read. He supposed it made her feel grown.<p>

One day after lunch John was surprised when he got a comm from Lasky.

"Good afternoon," he greeted formally.

"How long have you been on Earth," He asked excitedly. John assumed he looked at the comm channel address.

"About two months, Cortana got a position at Columbia University and was required to do a residency before she started teaching from the Outer Colonies," he explained.

"That's amazing, the duty day is almost over, would you like to get coffee?"

John couldn't help but feel that Lasky had very certainly known he was on Earth and very certainly wanted to make sure he wasn't lonely which seemed a little absurd to him. He supposed it was a nice intention but he never had been one for social calls. He and Kelly would often spend time together but it was usually in silence, exercising, or drinking, which were both very often done quietly; it was always more about the presence of the other's company for them. He found himself missing their relationship when confronted with the prospect of other social interaction.

Joan squawked loudly in the background, playing a game with one of her stuffed animals.

"I have Joan right now," he said.

"I would love to meet her," Lasky continued.

John held back a sigh. He should get used to this kind of thing, it would be good for him. "I suppose you could come over for dinner, if you would like you can bring Sarah, I'm sure Cortana won't mind, you

know how she is."

"That sounds even better, Sarah will be a little later she has a debrief at the end of the day," he said.

John felt that it was at least more polite to extend an invitation to Sarah, she was Lasky's girlfriend and he assumed that they didn't get to spend a terribly large amount of time together. There was a small part of him that would feel guilty or rude not inviting the both of them even though he wasn't particularly fond of the woman. He didn't dislike her at all and found her perspective interesting but had a difficult time understanding how he was supposed to conduct himself around her. He got a strange feeling that she was walking on eggshells around him.

John changed Joan into an outfit that he thought was a little more befitting of having guests, not that he cared entirely too much but he didn't have anything better to do. He also thought that her tights and skirt were cute, as silly as that might seem. Her bangs were getting long again and she kept pushing them out of her eyes.

He decided to go grab a pair of shears and try to make her life a little easier. She held still when he asked her to and he had to admit he was impressed with his skill, it looked good and identical to the way the professional had done it a few weeks ago.

When there was a knock on the door John went to go open it revealing Tom Lasky in civilian clothes.

John heard Joan's quick footsteps and she proclaimed "Mama!"

John sighed. Joan stopped in her tracks when she looked at the door and saw someone other than her mother, a look of extreme disappointment on her face.

"No Joan, Mommy is still at work, this is Tom Lasky, you should say hello," he coached. He found it amusing that he was coaching his daughter on social skills as she frowned at the deceptive door knock when really he felt like she had the right idea, frowning at guests.

He invited Tom in and Tom immediately kneeled down to Joan.

"So you're Joan, it's very nice to meet you," he said sweetly.

Joan continued to frown.

"I brought you something," he reached into his bag and pulled out a stuffed bear that was wearing a UNSC dress uniform. He offered it to her and she looked up at her father warily, not sure if it was a good idea to take the gift.

"Go ahead Joan, it's a present for you," John said sternly. She tentatively reached out for the bear and appeared to inspect it, touching its ears and the clothing. John watched her start to smile gradually. He was glad, she wasn't often introduced to new people and he knew it was important that she learn to socialize.

"What do you say when someone does something nice for you," he continued.

"Thank-you," she said articulately.

"Why don't you go introduce your new bear to your rabbit while Tom and Daddy talk for a while," he requested.

While Joan could be clingy, she could also be fiercely independent. She liked being given instructions or ideas. When he gave her tasks to accomplish she usually went to do them with fervor, though she was eventually distracted by something she found more amusing.

"My Kelly Bunny?"

John chuckled at the name she has given her animal-she associated it with Kelly because it had been a present from her and Fred and thus the animal was named "Kelly bunny."

"Sure, Kelly bunny likes making friends right?"

"Sometimes, other times she likes to be left alone," said Joan realistically.

"Well go check if she's in a mood to make friends," instructed John.

Tom couldn't help but smile as she ran off to her room. John invited Tom to sit and got them both water.

"You didn't need to bring her a present, Cortana just spent a ridiculous amount on toys for her after she was sick for a twenty-four hour period," said John.

"Well I had to get her something, I didn't send anything for either of her birthdays," he replied. John was shocked that the thought had even occurred to him. "Besides, I saw it at the exchange and thought it was just too perfect to pass up."

"Well thank you, I'm sure she'll enjoy it plenty," said John politely.

"So it hasn't been long but how are you finding Earth?"

"It's different than I would have imagined," John replied. "There is a lot to do."

"I love it, it feels so nice to finally be here, I wish everyone could live here if only for a little while," said Lasky.

John wanted to ask how work was but it felt intrusive. He couldn't help but wonder what the UNSC in a time of peace was like. Was it relaxed or was it just as intense, constantly preparing for a new threat? He knew that they were most assuredly not resting on their laurels but he couldn't imagine operating with the same sense of desperation that his career had consisted, of so needlessly-normal soldiers couldn't handle it for such extended periods of time.

Cortana walked in the door looking a little bit weary. When she heard the door catch, Joan tentatively looked out the door of her room, wary of another disappointment. Upon seeing it was her mother she

launched into something of a sprint.

"Mommy!" she exclaimed, nothing short of elated as she completely threw herself at Cortana.

Cortana laughed and lifted her up. "Well _hello _to you too sweet girl!" she said, peppering kisses all over her face, particularly her cheeks.

"Oh hi Tom," she said noticing him sitting on the couch. "John, what did you do to her to make her so excited to see me? Is daddy being mean to you sweetpea? Or is he just boring and grumpy?" she said, lowering her voice comically, jutting out her bottom lip into a mock pout.

"Tom came in the door and she thought it was you. She was severely disappointed until she was presented with a gift. Maybe she was convinced that you had turned into a man and is relieved to learn otherwise," John said sarcastically.

Cortana laughed. "I know someone else who might find that kind of news upsetting. Tom you might gather that we don't really have guests, it's nice to see you, you look well," she commented as she hitched Joan up further on her hip.

"God, she is getting heavy, what are you feeding her?" she said, setting her briefcase down. She sat on the couch next to John, brought her hand to his cheek, turned him to her and kissed him. "Hi," she greeted sweetly, relaxing finally. John couldn't help but feel the slightest amount of embarrassment at her affection.

"Same food as usual. Tom called me and Sarah is coming over for dinner," John said.

Cortana sighed. "I don't have anything nice enough for guests planned."

"Why don't we order in?" he asked.

"There's no need to make a fuss over me and Sarah," Tom replied.

"No that sounds nice, we haven't ordered in yet and the food here is supposed to be to die for," said Cortana. Joan was starting to babble excitedly. Most of what she was saying was complete nonsense but John heard a few words like 'bear,' and 'book.'

Cortana continued to listen attentively at the incoherent rambling, interjecting things like "Mhmm," and "Is that so?"

"Dada does work," Joan said wisely.

"Oh, what kind of work does your father do?" Cortana was amused.

"I help him," was her solemn response.

"Are you talking about when you sit on my legs?" John asked.

She nodded seriously.

"She sits on my legs when I do leg lifts in the morning and sits on

my back for push ups. We're working on pull-ups," he explained. He was trying to get her to stand on his feet while he did pull-ups because it was easier for him to focus on repetitions when he knew where she was and the extra weight didn't hurt.

"I'm sure that you're a very good helper for your father," said Cortana seriously. Joan nodded and stuck her thumb in her mouth. She squirmed out of her mother's lap rather unceremoniously and ran off to go do whatever she deemed important.

"She is really smart," said Tom, clearly impressed. "I haven't been around a lot of children but dang, she's two?"

"She gets that from her mother," deflected John.

"I suppose it's only natural," he agreed.

The door buzzed and John got up to get the door. He invited a somewhat weary looking Palmer inside-her hair was wet from showering after work and she looked a little haggard.

Cortana got up to go change into someone more comfortable. John couldn't help but notice the way Tom's eyes lit up for a fraction of a second looking at the Spartan commander-it was clear that he was very taken with her while Sarah seemed a little less affectionate. John understood how that was. He didn't know what Spartan training was like nowadays but he assumed that it was still difficult to connect to people outside. Perhaps she was simply tired.

Cortana came back wearing jeans and a t-shirt and greeted Sarah enthusiastically.

Sarah couldn't help but feel slightly unnerved at how kindly she acted towards her. The resemblance to Dr. Halsey was very apparent and it was strange because she knew that Dr. Halsey was most assuredly not her biggest fan considering she'd attempted to kill the woman. Ms. Palmer my ass, she thought irritatedly to herself, recalling the condescending way Dr. Halsey had addressed her.

"What kind of food do you like, I've got a few menus queued up," she said, expanding the search.

"I could go for Asian, that's one of the best take ins around here," said Tom.

They ordered and Cortana kicked up her feet.

"So I can't imagine John called you up to just chat, what brings you over here?" said Cortana.

Of course she has to make fun of me somehow, he mused.

"I actually saw in the news that a certain physicist from the Outer Colonies who revolutionized slipstream travel had started a residency at Columbia, naturally when I saw your picture I figured you would be around so I thought I'd say hello. I also wanted to personally thank you, I have a very bothersome allergy to cytoprethaline and I'm happy that I don't have to think much about it anymore," he said.

Cortana glowed at his praise. John knew that she loved being

validated by people besides him.

"Well it's definitely great to see the both of you, most of my social interaction is a bunch of college kids. They're all very intelligent but they're college kids nonetheless," she laughed. "We had our first exam recently and the grades were a little rough, I haven't decided if I'm going to curve it or not," she said.

"I think I probably will end up curving it, I'd rather make the exams a challenge and have them get more wrong than give them an easier test and have them get a higher percentage," she continued.

"Why can't they just get a good grade on the more challenging exam?" said John bluntly.

Sarah couldn't help but chuckle, it was such a Spartan thing to say.

"How about I give you the hardest problem on the test and we'll see how you fare John, it's for my Intro class so it's fair," she teased.

John couldn't pass up the challenge. He hadn't done math in a long, long while but he had been plenty proficient in his teen years, he also had gotten better at most academic subjects from spending so much time with Cortana in his head.

"Okay, sure," he accepted.

Cortana shook her head as she took a projection out of her briefcase and tossed it, letting the problem expand in front of him. It looked extremely complicated. It really didn't belong on an Intro exam but she had graded it very easily.

Cortana was seriously doubting his ability when she watched him stare at the equation determinedly.

He stared at it for another minute intently, not writing anything.

"I haven't done math like that since college, I'd be out of luck," said Lasky.

Another minute passed and right as Cortana was going to tell him to give up he started writing. He wrote quickly and neatly, his penmanship was extremely measured, everything looked perfectly even, all of the numbers and letters looked exactly the same with no variations.

The problem was now a few lines long and Cortana started to laugh.

Tom and Sarah looked at her a little confused. She shook her head as she continued to laugh.

"He's about to solve it, goddamnit," she said still chuckling.

He finished and turned it towards her.

"Well, you're right, that's the answer, only two students in my class

got the right answer and only one showed their work properly," she shook her head. "I guess you're not just the muscle-bound automaton the press makes you out to be," she teased.

John smiled remembering when she had said that to him right when they had met.

"Interesting choice of words for an Artificial Intelligence," was all he could reply with. Cortana laughed a little harder.

"Well now I _know _you can properly count to ten," she continued. Tom and Sarah looked slightly confused.

"When John and I first met, I detected a high degree of activity in his cerebral cortex so naturally I had to give him a backhanded compliment, he wasn't quite used to my...John, what would you call it?"

"I wasn't used to having someone so _obnoxious _in my head back then," he commented.

"Oh who had you had in your head _before _that for comparison?" She said. "Anyways, it was a really...interesting exercise to say the least, I'm sure you can imagine but John is a stickler for rules."

John nearly sighed. _This again? _

"I mean, doesn't that kind of come with the Spartan territory?" questioned Tom.

"When it's convenient for them sure," joked Cortana.

"Yeah, I love it when I get stuck lying to Admirals for Captains with a misguided sense of duty," said Sarah sarcastically.

"That was years ago," said Lasky.

"How is work going for you?" questioned Cortana.

Sarah sighed. They were both still cardholders and she knew it was ridiculous to worry about either of them saying anything to anyone so she didn't feel entirely wrong speaking a little bit about work.

"It's fine, better than a while ago, we're just constantly adapting to new force demands. The first class of Spartan-Vs are graduating soon and it's going to be a huge integration for the force tactically and supply wise," she said.

"What kind of capabilities do they have in store for all of you," said Cortana a little sarcastically.

"Obviously it's very classified but in all honesty most research seems to be going toward creating results nearly identical to the Spartan-IIs without the expense and mortality that's effective on adults. It's proven difficult, we just don't want to get as tall for some reason," she said.

"There are reasons for that," said Cortana a little cryptically. For

the first time John felt uncomfortable thinking about his augmentation procedures. He had been so blind to what was going on. The juxtaposition between him as a 14 year old and grown adults was staggering at times. He didn't know how it should make him feel. Living in what many would refer to as the "real world" outside of the UNSC he couldn't help but feel that he had been so naive for so many years despite seeing so many things during the wars he'd fought in.

"How is the Admiral?" he said quietly. He thought of her as Serin-019 in his head still. He didn't know why she came up in his thoughts or why he called her that-she was an Admiral. Her first name felt right in some ways and like a distant, sad, memory in others. He hadn't thought of Kelly or Fred with their Spartan tags in almost a year. When he had taken a last name 117 started to fade away, very much a part of his identity still but just not something he referred to himself as anymore. It had surprised him how natural it was to let go, to let 117 fade away, always a part of him but not at the front of his mind.

Sarah also seemed surprised at his question. The door buzzed and Cortana got up to get food.

"She seems well, or as well as someone who's the spook of all spooks can be. As difficult as she can be she is one of the best damned commanding officers I've ever seen," she said firmly.

John wondered what it would be like to see her, to see one of the few remnants of his Spartan family besides Kelly and Fred. He thought of Linda far away in her monastery, Maria who was somewhere on Earth and any others that might still be alive. Fred and Kelly had seen Naomi after the end of the war, though from the way they spoke of it the visit had been somewhat upsetting for them; they chose not to go into great detail aside from stating that Naomi was alive and seemed to be well when they saw her. He didn't know if anyone else was out there, but it was something he thought of from time to time. The Admiral had been on his mind fleetingly for a few months now, something about her being alive when they had been lead to believe that she was dead bothered him. He should have been used to being lied to, his whole life, in many ways, had been centered around lies and secrets but the notion that they had mourned Serin as dead when she had lived, it seemed rather cruel to him. It also raised many more questions: what other lies had he been told?

"Joan, come out here please," he raised his voice so she would know he was speaking to her. She ran out to the living room and to her Father, looking up at him. She quickly noticed Sarah as a new person in their house.

Instead of frowning or glaring she started smiling. John was surprised. Joan walked up to her and looked at her.

Sarah hadn't seen a child in a long while and she was astounded at how simply _adorable _the Master Chief's daughter was. She had big, dark blue eyes and bright red hair, she looked every bit her father's daughter with only very subtle traces of Cortana, mostly in the way she softened a lot of John's harsher features-the shape of her mouth and her pouty expression were reminiscent of her mother. Other than that her coloring, cheekbones, and face shape, were tiny, feminine versions of her father's features. She was dressed very cutely in

green and grey.

"Present?" She squeaked. John felt a rush of embarrassment and Tom started laughing.

Cortana groaned, "Joan you're being a brat, look what you did Tom now she expects presents from every visitor."

Sarah couldn't help but laugh. She was also clearly precocious.

"Joan," her head snapped towards her father, he was using a voice that always got her attention. "It's rude to ask people for presents, Sarah is our guest and we treat guests well. Maybe after dinner you could go make _her _a present since you like receiving them so much."

Certainly not for the first time Sarah found herself shocked by the Spartan. He seemed to be a very attentive, loving father. She had no idea how he was capable of this considering he had no mother or father, no childhood and had seen some of the worst things the world has to offer. She herself had no idea if she could ever be a mother after everything she'd seen and done.

Joan smiled happily at the idea. "With colors?"

John thought of the special pigment sheets she had that she could make pictures with, she had made him about twenty pictures over the course of the week and he kept every single one.

"Yes you may use your color sheets, but after dinner," he agreed.

Dinner was satisfying, John had never eaten food like this and found it interesting. Joan had gotten better about absolutely destroying her food and only got her face messy instead of constantly playing with her food. John noticed that she switched the hand she ate with, showing no real preference of right or left.

Joan seemed fixated upon Sarah. Sarah initially thought she was imagining it but after Cortana had wiped her mouth and let her out of her chair she went immediately to her chair and started trying to crawl up onto her lap.

Cortana laughed. "She likes you, she never does that to anyone besides Kelly."

Sarah was surprised to be shown such ardent affection by the little girl. She had crawled her way onto her lap and was looking right at her smiling for no apparent reason.

"You like Spartans like your daddy don't you Joan," teased Cortana.

She had never really considered herself a "Spartan like her daddy," the differences seemed obvious to her. Sarah knew that a toddler couldn't possibly understand what Spartans were but she supposed that the most normal person she's accustomed to is her mother who is also anything but normal. She had no idea what growing up would be like for her with the most extraordinary members of the human race as her

standard for normal.

"I like you," Joan confirmed. Sarah felt her heart skip a beat.

"I like you too," was all she could choke out. It was a lot, after two wars and a challenging peacetime. It felt strangely gratifying to have something as simple as a child's approval.

"Why don't you bring a few of your favorite toys out here to show Sarah how you play," Cortana encouraged.

Joan smiled widely and with coordination that seemed unbefitting her toddler stature she jumped off Sarah's lap and ran to her room-Sarah was beginning to wonder if this child ever walked.

Tom looked at Sarah and could tell that it was an oddly emotional encounter for her. He felt that for many people, it would be. It was surreal that someone as legendary as John-117 could retire and have a happy, well-adjusted child. It was quite literally the perfect success story, what the UNSC hoped for when members got out, a story that seldom played out this well.

They moved back to the living area and Tom continued to talk mostly with Cortana while John listened. Sarah was roped into coloring. Joan continued to 'explain' to her what her picture was.

Joan presented her with the drawing that was mostly scribbles with a few circles and lines, she seemed rather proud.

"Thank you," she said earnestly. She would put this in her office for sure.

"Joan, it's bedtime," said Cortana quietly.

"No," she whined rather skillfully.

"Joan, when your mother says it's bedtime you need to listen like a big girl," John spoke sternly but somehow still gently. Joan frowned but started to get up, dragging her feet forlornly as she gathered her toys.

"Say goodnight to Sarah, she can visit another day," he assured.

"Goodnight," she said tearfully. Sarah had no idea how they could deal with such melodrama seriously, she just wanted to laugh even though she knew that this was quite the blow to the little girl.

"Goodnight Joan," she said politely. Cortana took Joan by the hand and walked her to her bedtime fate.

John sighed. "She doesn't like going to bed when people are over, she thinks she's missing out on excitement. She always refused to go to bed unless Fred and Kelly's daughter went to bed with her when they were over for an evening back home."

"The drama is high," chuckled Tom.

"You may laugh but I can assure you she doesn't find it amusing, she

takes herself rather seriously," said John.

Cortana walked into the room in time to quip, "I wonder who she gets _that _from." John smiled softly.

"She wants a hug and kiss from you, those are her demands," Cortana said running a hand through her hair.

Sarah watched as the Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 got up wordlessly to tuck his daughter into bed. She had no idea how the world hadn't collapsed in on itself.

Sarah felt the question slip out before her filter could catch it. "What does the old bat Halsey think of _that_," she gestured towards the bedroom John had walked into.

Tom glared at her rudeness, "Sarah-

"No, it's okay, I understand. My relationship with her is...complicated at best, I take no offense, having a child helped me truly understand the differences between her and myself," she paused and wrung her hands.

"To be honest I think she finds the relationship John and I have strange and uncomfortable not only because I was an AI whose origins lie with her but because she doesn't necessarily view John as an autonomous being. I think that while she holds a certain degree of love and affection for her Spartans, perhaps most of all John, they are tangible manifestations of her intellect and secondarily they are people. She takes pride and ownership over them-nothing ever simply exists for her, they are _her _Spartans, I was _her _AI. Before the SPARTAN program she was cold and callous to an almost horrific degree. In some twisted sense the SPARTAN program softened her heart, as completely wrong as that must seem."

That's for sure, that hardly makes sense. Bet she did some real soul searching when she was kidnapping a bunch of kids, _really honed her maternal instinct,_ thought Sarah sarcastically.

"I think Joan is particularly problematic for her in many ways. She is not only very unique, she represents something that Catherine never thought John would have. I think that a part of her almost thought I had somehow magically gotten myself pregnant until she walked in on us once."

Sarah couldn't help but understand where the doctor was coming from in that regard-it was weird. It just seemed contradictory, but who was she to have an opinion on the Chief's sexual endeavors? She also would have paid to see the Doctor's reaction to catching the two of them going at it. After the little she had heard of them at their wedding she was quite certain they had a rather functional sex life making anything the Doctor had witnessed probably all the more traumatic. Her face must have been nothing short of priceless. She probably _would _have imagined her Spartans dying sad virgins-highly unfortunate.

"She sincerely loves Joan which must seem strange for a woman who chose not to raise her daughter but I know it's true. In the short amount of time she stayed with us she not only watched me deliver a baby, which she expected, but she saw something she didn't entirely

anticipate. She saw John become a father. In short, I think she finds it deeply, deeply disturbing on a personal level but also feels a sense of possessiveness over myself, John and even Joan," she finished calmly.

John sat down next to Cortana. Even though he had most certainly heard everything she'd said he didn't act like it.

"How do you do it?" She asked pointedly. She couldn't help but ask, especially since she had already started asking forward questions. "How do you, of all people, manage to be this accessible, gentle, loving Father when there are vets who've seen a fraction of what you have who come home and strangle their spouse after years of finding themselves in the bottom of a bottle. I know that we are Spartans but you have shown me that you aren't so different despite being so fundamentally changed as a human, so how in the world are you doing this?"

Silence filled the air. Sarah worried for a split second that she had gone too far but she also knew that she had to know. She had to know if John-117 truly was a better man than any other or if he was as fundamentally broken as everyone.

Cortana looked at John. She could tell he was thinking very carefully about how he would respond. She understood why Sarah might have felt the need for justification from him.

"Before Joan was born I worried constantly about the type of Father I would be, but when she finally got here," he paused remembering the feeling of how real she was, what it had been like to hold her in his arms for the first time, how everything about her was a part of him, "It was easy, easier than anything I've ever done. She is so perfect and happy, she depends on Cortana and myself entirely, we're her whole world."

He cleared his throat a little, continuing. "I think because I have never viewed myself as some grandiose hero it's not difficult to simply move on from that part of my life, to move on from the Halo Campaign and everything else. It was my entire life, yes, but it was easy to compartmentalize-I didn't struggle with admitting that it was over like Kelly or Fred did. It simply was," he said solemnly.

Sarah looked at him and still saw the proud Spartan-117 until, for a moment, she saw a glimpse of something else on his stoic, proud face, something she couldn't place.

"If what you are really asking is how a man with no memory of a mother or father who spent his childhood being taught how to kill people can rationalize having a wife and a daughter, I can't give you an answer. It's something I think about every day. Every day since Cortana told me the basic information about my family I've grappled with reality. I see my daughter and wonder if, in four years time, I would be able to look at her and accept sacrificing her for the greater good of humanity. I have given everything for mankind, answered every single call and endured almost every possible test and yet, deep down, I know I'd rather watch the whole world burn than lose her."

He felt desperate thinking about it. It was an impossibility. His

Joan, who smiled and "loved him best," gone to him forever could never, ever happen. He had arrived at that conclusion over the last year. Where that left him he didn't know.

"That terrifies me. It doesn't line up with my perception of myself. I don't know what happened to me much before age 10, only fleeting memories mostly of Kelly and Sam. Over the past few months I have thought about learning more and trying to understand," he was extremely grave in his speech.

"Which leads me to something I have wanted to ask of you, Tom," he looked at him very directly.

"Of course, anything," he said quietly. After hearing that kind of information you couldn't help but feel _something_. Tom felt a strange pit in his stomach.

"I want to know if you could get me a meeting with Admiral Osman. I want to speak with her."

Sarah saw it. In his eyes. He was both. He was just as broken as anyone and strong enough, _good _enough for it to be arbitrary. She was awestruck.

Lasky thought about this. Most people couldn't simply request an audience with an Admiral, let alone the head of ONI, but he had a feeling that this would be a special exception.

"I can figure that out," he promised.

* * *

><p>I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, it's up there for me. :)<p>

21. Chapter 21

This chapter is a shorter chapter because I couldn't figure out where I wanted to break it up and the next chapter will probs be hella long because of the nature of the content. (ALL of the feels.) So bear with me, I know it's short but I think you'll thank me next chapter. I should post relatively quickly, I just need to write more get a little more ahead. :) Thanks all y'all who review, you're seriously the best. :)

* * *

><p>Palmer straightened her collar before she sat down at her desk. She sipped her coffee and started her work. It had been a week since she had visited New York City with Tom and it still had her feeling a little shaken. She glanced at the picture Joan had drawn-she now realized that it was a picture of two people, one tall and one tiny standing together. The scribbles were organized into hair along with fingers and toes-she had never heard of a two year old that could accurately count fingers and toes that well but each appendage had the proper amount of lines depicting digits.<p>

She continued to work until she heard a knock on her door. Who was bothering her this early, most people were just starting off the day

and in briefings or finishing showering after morning PT.

"Come in," she said distractedly.

When Admiral Osman walked in she stood up so quickly it pushed her chair into the wall behind her desk.

"As you were," she said immediately. Sarah relaxed slightly but still stood up straight.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" she said calmly. She hoped to _God _she wasn't getting another wave of inspections, they were such a logistical nightmare and with new Spartans it was a complete and utter waste of bureaucratic nonsense when there was real training to accomplish.

"Captain Lasky said you had something I would be interested in, he was rather mysterious about it and I have no idea what he could be talking about, do you have a clue?"

Palmer frowned slightly. _Thanks a lot Tom, send an Admiral to my office with an extremely vague request, always a great way to get on my good side,_ she fumed.

She wracked her brain. She knew Tom, he was constantly looking for a way to help someone. How could a visit to her office help any-

She glanced at the picture on her desk and picked it up, staring at it for a moment.

"I think it's this," she said, handing it over to the somewhat grave woman.

Her brow furrowed. "Not what I expected," she turned the picture a little bit, inspecting it more closely. "This is nice, but I think I'm missing the message. Do you care to enlighten me?"

"A very special little girl drew that for me," she said, hoping her anxiety wasn't showing. The Admiral looked at her, prompting her to continue. "An interesting girl in New York City who happens to be the two year old daughter of Spartan John-117."

Palmer saw a quick moment of shock flash across the Admiral's face before she mastered herself.

"So were you babysitting?"

"No, though I wouldn't object, she was quite fond of me. Captain Lasky was invited over for dinner by the Chief personally and because of the relationship between the Captain and myself," she paused a little awkwardly. Their relationship was public knowledge, they had the same home of record but it was still a little uncomfortable speaking of something so personal, "I was extended an invitation as well," she finished.

"While I'm sure it was an interesting dinner, how is this relevant to me?" She set the picture down gently.

"He wanted to know if it was possible for you two to meet, he wants to speak with you," she replied.

Osman felt a quick stab in her chest. "Do you know what he would like to discuss?"

Palmer struggled for words, her blunt marine attitude rearing its ugly head. "Permission to speak freely ma'am?"

"Granted."

"He seemed pretty messed up. He's a _really _good Father, so good that he's realizing how messed up he is about everything. He has this makeshift family in the outer colonies consisting of himself, 087 and 104 but he knows that he had something else before all of this. He and his family are using his original surname even. He knows that Cortana knows everything and she's told him the basics but I think he wants to see for himself. I think he wants to learn his past," she said quickly.

Osman folded her hands and inhaled deeply trying to calm the frantic emotions she was feeling, a facade that she'd perfected in her years as the Commander-in-chief of ONI.

"Thank you Commander, that will be all," she didn't even wait for Palmer to reciprocate her farewell as she walked briskly back to her office.

She opened the door and shut it behind her quickly.

"Cancel my appointments for the rest of the afternoon," she said to her AI.

"Are you sure, you have an important meeting with-"

"I don't care, send them an apology saying I'll reschedule, this is more important."

John watched Joan scribble on her drawing tablet. She had taken up singing to herself mindlessly almost as if she just _had _to fill silence with some form of noise. John found it entertaining and also interesting when she would repeat the same made up songs showing that she had memorized that kind of material. He assumed it was good for her.

He was receiving a call on his comm tablet from an undisclosed number. He warily picked it up and watched the screen projection expand outward displaying none other than the Admiral of ONI herself.

John fought the instinctive urge to stand up for an Admiral.

"Greetings Admiral," he said politely.

Osman listened as she heard what was presumably his daughter singing in the background-had he just tuned it out?

"I'd greet you but I don't know what you would prefer to be called," she said.

He hesitated. "John is fine."

Osman already knew he had to have been different-going by her first name had been a big part of shedding her Spartan-II identity.

"John then, I saw from Commander Palmer that your daughter is quite the artist," she said casually.

John realized that Joan was still 'singing' loudly as she scribbled-he had completely blocked it out in his anxious response to the call.

"A moment please," he requested.

Osman watched him go out of the frame and heard him a little more distantly.

"Joan can you stop singing for a little bit please?"

She heard a peal of laughter and a resounding "No!" followed by an exasperated sigh. Clearly the child thought he was playing a game and started to 'sing' louder.

"Joan," she heard him say a little more seriously. The girl stopped singing. "Daddy needs you to be quiet for a few minutes while he has a conversation with someone important, you need to be a big girl and listen."

"Can I sing more later?"

Osman thought she was going to have a heart attack when she heard him correct "Yes you _may _sing more later, but only if you go play quietly for a little bit."

"O-kay," was the cheery response.

She understood entirely now why the Chief was confused, _she _was even confused.

If he was embarrassed he didn't show it when he sat back down.

"Alright, I'm going to cut some of the Admiral bullshit right now, I've cleared my schedule for the rest of the day, it's clear that there are some conversations we should have."

John was shocked. He hadn't expected such a reaction. He didn't have many memories of her but her actions didn't really fit in with any Spartan-IIs he remembered. She was a Spartan like him, that he was sure ofâ€"you can't just dismiss the experience they shared but he knew ONI was something different, and he wasn't sure what to think about that. Either way, she would have the answers he needed.

"My wife is working late into the evening, I'll have to bring my daughter," he said. He would've brought her either way-something about him going to a military installation and leaving Joan alone felt wrong to him even though it was entirely irrational.

"That's fine, I look forward to meeting your little songstress. I'll have someone waiting for you at the gate to make sure you don't have any troubles getting to my office."

"Understood," he replied succinctly. He ended the call.

Almost robotically he packed a bag for Joan with her necessities and things to keep her entertained. He sent Cortana a message so she wouldn't worry and so she would know where he was.

Without fully realizing how he had gotten to that point, he was on the fastest train he could catch to Sydney.

The gate was ostentatious. It had an imposing presence that loomed over him. He knew that it was a center of knowledge but it felt ominous to him.

Joan somehow knew to be quiet as he flashed his ID card and had his retina scanned. After the MP's jaw dropped he was taken to the escort detail. It consisted of two Spartan-IVs in biosuits.

Good to know that I still seem threatening with a two year old in tow, he thought sarcastically. He understood that for the purpose of appearances that this was how it needed to be. If he hadn't been going to go see the Admiral of ONI he would've been perfectly fine just walking on and going to the exchange for a discount on electronics.

"Here you are Sir," one of the Spartans said, stepping aside when they arrived at the Admiral's office.

"Daddy is a Sir?" Joan chirped. She had been quiet the entire time until that. He saw the Spartans smile.

"Not anymore sweetheart," he whispered softly, setting her down but still holding her hand as they walked into the office. It was very ornate with wood paneling and heavy doors that indicated her importance and position.

Admiral Serin Osman stood by her desk. John could tell she had been pacing judging by her posture.

Once the doors shut behind him she addressed him.

"Please, sit," she said calmly. John appreciated the sturdy wood chairs. Joan sat on his lap. She was busy looking around the office, entertained by the framed pictures and certificates so she was quiet.

He looked at her. Almost half of her hair was grey. Her face was stern and unyielding-he understood what Sarah had been talking about, had he been someone else he would've perhaps found her intimidating.

But he remembered her. He remembered her vividly as a skinny little girl with arms and legs too long for her body. He hadn't remembered that until he sat with her in this room, face to face.

"Spartan-117," she said, addressing him formally. He heard her mutter what he assumed were override commands and sigh. "There, now we can speak privately, I will call you John and you will call me Serin," she said coolly. He nodded. He liked how direct she was. He knew that

as the commander of ONI she was a woman well versed in games and deceptions, but as far as he could tell there was none of that going on between the two of them. That was good because games were never his strong suit. "Cortana had always been the one to interpret the subtleties that came with politics.

"Correct me if I am wrong, Commander Palmer said you were interested in seeing information from your file."

"Yes. I also want to see videos from Reach." He knew this was important to him. He wanted a visual. He wanted to see and understand the events in their entirety.

"Your wife who somehow once was an Artificial Intelligence knows all the information on your file, why don't you just have her tell you everything?" She probed.

"I want to form my own opinions. I don't know if you have ever met or heard of Cortana but she has...strong opinions on most subjects." That was an understatement.

"I am prepared to allow you access to any material you desire, it's your right. However, there are some conversations that need to be had first, one with myself and another with someone else."

"I want to know for my own purposes, I'm prepared to sign a nondisclosure-"

"That's not what this is about, I'm not worried about that. We need to talk about me for a quick moment," she said.

He felt a little confused but he waited for her to continue.

"I didn't read my file until very recently. I held off for many reasons I'm sure you can imagine. I want you to be sure this is what you want. What you see and learn is going to change you, even if you don't think it will. You have things to consider that I never could have imagined. Not only do you have a daughter, your wife is directly connected to Catherine Halsey."

"I don't understand what my wife has to do with this," he said.

Her face contorted into a scowl. "I don't know what your relationship is with our esteemed Doctor but it's no secret how I feel. No matter what you think, your perception of Catherine Elizabeth Halsey will change. Perhaps it won't be entirely earth shattering for you, but there will be a change, I can assure you of that. I want to be sure that you are understanding this especially considering your situation. Sometimes ignorance really is bliss."

She was a good officer. He could tell she cared about her people, even from such a high position.

"With all due respect, I am not married to Catherine Halsey," he stated firmly. It was a distinction he grew weary of making-he didn't understand how Cortana wasn't viewed as something entirely different. He knew her, she was Cortana and nobody else.

"If you feel inclined I'd like to tell you what I found in my file, mostly for the sake of contrast that will come later, is this

okay?"

John felt overwhelmed with the trust he was being afforded by her. He hadn't seen her since they were fourteen but she still very clearly trusted him, at least in some capacity. He nodded, ready to hear what she had to say.

"After I washed out, it gave my mind time to wander, probably a very different scenario than yours. I started thinking about who my parents might be. I wondered if they missed me, if they were sad when my flash clone died. When I read my file I learned that none of that was the case. My mother was a drug addicted prostitute and I had no father to speak of, I lived on the streets searching for shelter and food. The only person in the entire world who cared for me was a school teacher," she paused. "When ONI came for me, I was so hungry and scared, all they had to do was offer me food and I went with them. I didn't even merit a flash clone because they knew that no one would really miss me," she brought her fist to her mouth, trying to compose herself. "Knowing that no one really cared that I disappeared was both liberating and crippling. It was opposite of what you're going to hear next, Ms. Sentzke, you can come in."

Standing tall and proud in civilian clothes with a badge ID was Naomi-010.

"Hello John," she said, her voice soft.

"Naomi," he said, standing up. She smiled at him softly and reached out and shook his hand.

"It's been a long time, it's so wonderful to see you," she spoke in a very soothing manner. "I work as a civilian contractor now to assist Admiral Osman with anything she needs. She told me that you needed guidance in pursuing your past. I am happy to discuss this matter with you, it is extremely important. My story is not short so please make yourself comfortable."

She spun a tale of a happy family and a devoted father on Sansar. She talked about ONI and how she woke up when they took off her clothes and how she had run, run, run away from them. He could tell that she remembered the fear she had felt that night and exactly how futile it had been.

"Years later as an adult I found out my father became an Insurrectionist arms dealer-he had known somewhere within himself that I had been taken from him. My mother killed herself six months after my flashclone died, she blamed herself somehow. My father was mad with grief. He found me and we talked," she took a shaky breath. John couldn't even imagine what that must have been like for her.

"I was forty-two years old and I apologized to my father for being taken from him. I blamed myself for his decline and my mother's death, if only a six year old had been able to outrun the UNSC. My father sobbed. He looked at my arms in horror and asked what they had done to me. I explained that I had been made into a perfect soldier. He smashed his fists on the table and insisted that I already had been perfect, that no one had needed to do anything to me."

John looked at Joan who had fallen asleep in his arms despite the emotional conversation happening. He understood-he wouldn't change a

single thing about Joan, to even imagine altering her seemed sick, she was perfect as she was.

Tears started to roll down Naomi's cheeks as she continued. "I will never forget his face, it's burned into my memory forever. Even though we were forced to forget so many things, to ignore so much, it will never go away. I had never felt more like a monster in my life, more disgusted with myself than when my father looked at these scars on my arms. After the encounter with my father, I had an AI, Black Box, help me view my previous memories and my file from Reach. John," she shook her head as if she could hardly bear to go on. John wanted to tell her to stop but he also knew he had to know what she was going to say.

"What they did to us was disgusting. I watched my psych evals with Halsey and for weeks I insisted that my father was going to find me and kill everyone because he loved me. Do you know what she said to me, six years old me?"

John waited for her to continue. Serin put a comforting hand on Naomi's shoulder.

"She told me, 'Daddy's not coming for you, Naomi,'" Naomi clenched her hands around the edge of the table until her knuckles were white, "'He knows you've got an important job to do. He knows you're too special to be anything other than a Spartan,'" she hissed the words, her face flushing red with anger. The wood of the desk started to splinter as she gripped it with what John knew was only a fraction of the force she could exert.

"After that, I was broken, in all the subsequent videos I saw my personality disappear, the little girl I was supposed to be was taken away from me forever. That lying bitch made me think that my own father had abandoned me because I was some sort of special fucking science experiment chosen to save the world. It's a joke, the whole thing was a sick, twisted joke. We weren't chosen, we were used and tossed aside when it was convenient, recycled when it worked out," she gestured at Serin. John looked at the Admiral and could see her heavy burden, her half Spartan existence. He could see the years on the both of them, in that moment. He felt every one of his years when he thought about it. It felt so heavy, he didn't know how he hadn't noticed before.

"Look at your little girl, safe in your arms and tell me that it was okay, that because she has a brilliant mother and a strong father the world needs her to be something she isn't, her existence, her more than likely good genetics, make her owe something to humanity. That's all it came down to for us, good genes and a few otherwise arbitrary factors."

The idea sickened John. Joan didn't owe anyone anything. She was a little girl.

"Thank God for the Covenant, they're the only thing that prevented me from thinking my entire life was a waste. Being a Spartan is all I have ever known and all that I ever will know. I am grateful I could save mankind. But I would have volunteered, I would have chosen this life. We had everything taken from us. To justify the actions of the adults who failed us is impossible-there is no acceptable reasoning. Halsey wrote in her journals about how we seemed happy to be

Spartans, how we were her perfect little test subjects who were a little weepy initially but happy to conform. I wasn't. I fought my assailants and I fought the indoctrination until I couldn't anymore," she inhaled deeply, trying to compose herself. "And that is my file, the pain, misery and loss that ended up becoming Naomi-010. And I was perfect, I was the perfect Spartan, we all were. I couldn't have been any better, I killed when they said yes, I felt what I was supposed to feel when I was supposed to feel it, just the way were made."

John was amazed. He couldn't even imagine how her father must have felt, driven into madness at the loss of both his daughter and wife. He could feel the hurt Naomi felt, how she mourned her childhood and the loss of her innocence.

"Thank you Naomi," he said sincerely. He paused. "I need to ask you one question."

She looked at him, her eyes red from her tears.

"What would you do if you saw Halsey again?" He needed to know for sure what she felt.

She looked at Serin and chuckled softly. It was slightly terrifying how almost crazed she seemed. It was the closest he'd ever seen a Spartan to losing control.

"There was a time that I would've told you that I'd strangle her with my own two hands, that I would ask her how special I was as I watched the life leave her eyes." Her voice was cold. He knew she meant it and it was perhaps the closest thing he'd felt to fear in a while. He had seldom heard anything that ruthless.

She composed herself slightly and spoke again. "But now, John, I don't think I'd do anything. I have wasted so much time being angry at her, hating her, detesting her and wishing that she was dead. If I saw her, if she were in this room with us right now, I would look right through her. I know that would kill her, more than any physical act that I could do."

She sighed and ran a hand through her hair, sweeping her bangs from her forehead and back.

"If I never see her again it'll be too soon. I know others were also responsible, but her ability to just lie, her ability to ruin lives because she thinks she's so brilliant," she spat the word out as if it was truly appalling to her, "is something I can never, ever forgive."

Naomi inhaled deeply to master herself.

"Now you know what may be in store for you if you read that file, if you watch those videos. It's not pleasant, sometimes it's unbearable, but it's the truth," she had completely regained her composure, he could hardly tell she had been so upset but moments ago.

Serin nodded. "With that being said, I can let you use my office for the next two hours to watch any footage we have archived from Reach."

"I can watch your daughter," said Naomi softly. John was initially terrified at the idea-he didn't want her out of his sight. He knew that if there was anyone on this Earth he could trust with Joan though, it was Naomi. He knew what Joan symbolized to her. He nodded and gently passed her over to the blonde Spartan.

Serin entered the access codes and he saw his name "John Black" displayed on the documentation. The two women left the office, leaving him completely alone. He started to read.

* * *

><p>AND I HAVE TO CUT IT OFF HERE! Til next time. :)<p>

22. Chapter 22

We're still taking a break from John, I have to build the drama. I'm sorry all! But this chapter includes one of my favorite scenes I've ever written. You may be confused if you haven't read the Kilo-5 Trilogy by Karen Traviss but eh, you'll catch on. Thank you all for reviewing, it brings me happiness I couldn't even begin to describe.

* * *

><p>Naomi bounced Joan on her knee and she giggled loudly.<p>

Oh John, this must be so terribly, terribly complicated for you, she thought to herself sadly.

"You're a happy little thing aren't you?" Serin asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Why are you dressed like that?"

Serin looked down at her Admiral rig and tugged at the gold cord on her shoulder.

"This?"

"Yeah!" she wiggled her way out of Naomi's grasp and pulled herself up onto Serin's lap with a surprising amount of dexterity and coordination.

Oh okay, I guess I'm holding a kid now, she thought to herself. Joan started to touch the cord and her collar curiouslyâ€"she was a ball of energy.

"I'm an Admiral so I dress like one," she explained.

"Do all Admrals," she pronounced the word wrong, "dress like you?"

"More or less."

"But all dads don't dress like my dad."

"How does your dad dress?"

"He wears t-shirts and pants with pockets to keep stuff in, except when he wakes up in the morning and wears sleepy pants and no shirt because he's a boy. And mommy wears lots of clothes, she wears her sleepy dress and then she wears smartie clothes for when she goes away to work."

"Well these are my smartie clothes then."

"My daddy says that my mommy is the smartest woman in the _world_," she gestured widely on the word world.

"Oh, and why is that?"

"Mommy does work on engines that make people go place to place and teaches people, too bad if you wanted to be smartest woman in the world then," she said shrugging her shoulders, her eyes alight with mischief.

Serin couldn't help but smile at the simple way she thoughtâ€"clearly this is what made her mother the most intelligent woman in the world. Her parents were clearly super heroes to her but not for the reasons that most people would elevate them to such legendary status.

"What does your father do?"

Naomi watched the little girl's eyes light up at the mere mention of her father.

"My daddy takes care of _me,_ " she said excitedly. "He takes me to the park, we do exercise, and he teaches me numbers and letters. We take naps and we read books, Daddy is the best at games. Daddy drinks coffee and I do too because I'm a big girl."

"What makes your Dad so good at games?"

"He has the best ideas for pretend."

"What kind of pretend?"

"I dunno, just fun stuff."

_Yep, the Master Chief is her hero not because he'd saved the human race multiple times over but because he's a good story teller and could say his alphabet. Children are pretty damn amazing. _Serin shook her head in awe.

I wonder if John is pretending he's normal, thought Naomi sadly.

Serin looked over and saw Naomi's withdrawn expression.

"Are you okay?" she asked while Joan played with her watch.

"It's just strange to see her so normal."

"Mm. It makes you wonder what you could have had I suppose."

"No, I don't think it's that, it makes me wonder what I could still have."

"What, you changing your mind about being a housewife?"

"It's something I had always thought impossible for me and here I see John happy as a father. If I had had to pick any of us," Serin knew that when she said that she was thinking of all of their Spartan class, "to have a family or anything like that, John would have been the last one that I would've expected."

"John was always the last one we expected the normal from in any regard-he was immortal to us and he was in his own way separate from us. His destiny was always going to be different from ours even from when we were children, that was sealed when Cortana picked him. It further emphasized that he was the chosen, or I suppose lucky one."

"Does it all come down to that?"

"Being chosen was a lot of things for us. What it all comes down to, however, are our choices. John has chosen to be a father and learn about his past. I wanted us to have choices as adults."

Naomi crossed her legs and shifted her weight a little awkwardly. It was still strange to think about.

Joan snuggled herself into Serin's chest.

"I like you Admral lady, you can be my friend," she declared suddenly, her eyes seemed to be drooping slightly with fatigue—"probably a long trip for the little kid."

"I should take you to my meetings, I bet you could convince everyone to like me," she said sarcastically.

Actually my cabinet would do nothing but adore her, I bet that would work well for me, she thought to herself sarcastically.

"My daddy would let me go, I'm a big girl and he lets me do fun stuff," she yawned.

"I'm sure he lets you do pretty much whatever you want sweat-pea," she agreed.

She could tell that John, for all his cold, lethal, ferocity as a Spartan soldier, was something of a pushover father. Joan stuck her thumb in her mouth and nodded off to sleep.

Serin felt overwhelmed with strange nostalgia.

"Did John suck his thumb when we were kids?" she asked Naomi. On occasion she found herself remembering random facts from their earlier training days, it was a little unnerving. Being around Naomi had definitely brought it out, the other day she remembered very suddenly that she had been the worst at uniform inspection—"she had gotten herself electrocuted multiple times for having horrendous dress and appearance. Clearly it was something that had been beaten out of her quite efficiently as her dress and appearance was now nothing short of impeccable."

"I'm not entirely sure but I think I vaguely remember someone getting yelled at for that once, it would be reasonable to think that it was

John considering his daughter seems to have the same habit," she replied.

Naomi wondered exactly what habits and traits she may have inherited from her mother and father. She had met her father yes but she still hadn't really known him.

"I think he is trying to live his childhood," said Naomi sadly. She understood that desire somewhere within herself, not even necessarily having one just having the conception of what it even was. What it might have been like to play and live with adults taking care of you instead of training you.

"You're probably right, even if he doesn't know that. There are more destructive, selfish reasons to have children. He takes care of her," she couldn't help but finish a little bitterly.

"I'm sorry," Naomi said softly. _I'm sorry for making you think of that, reminding you once again that I was wanted and that you weren't, _she thought to herself.

"Don't apologize. I had Parangosky, she loved me in her own way, there's no reason to feel all too sorry for me," she deflected.

Naomi sighed.

"She really thinks the _world _of him," observed Naomi, thinking about Joan's earlier musings on her father.

"He is her whole world," sighed Osman. She decided to change the topicâ€"there would be plenty more time to talk about John if they wanted.

"What are your evening plans?"

She and Naomi lived together. The idea of being alone was scary to Naomi still and Serin appreciated the reminder that she wasn't always CINI- that she wasn't sitting on a cold lonely throne constantly. Originally Naomi was a painful reminder of her failure as a Spartanâ€"now she they shared a strong bond because of their shared experience. Naomi was a reminder of what Serin was first and foremostâ€"a survivor.

"I'm going to St. Petersburg."

Serin arched a brow and Naomi flushed a little bit.

"This wouldn't have something to do with our favorite Russian ODST now would it?"

Naomi looked down awkwardly.

"Don't make this something it isn't, Vaz's estranged mother just wants to meet me."

Serin laughed her bark of a laugh. "You're meeting his _mother_? Jesus, Naomi either you're his girl or you're leading him on really bad."

Naomi felt her heart in her throat. He had looked out for her over the years, he had been there for her, especially when she didn't realize it. It was simple: he was him and she was her. He understood her and didn't question her—he filled in the blanks for her, the things she couldn't understand he made sense of.

_So many confusing, strange, positively wonderful feelings. _She thought back to the evening she had spent with him about a month ago.

It was the dead of night and she had been restless so she went for a walk outside. Vaz and Mal were staying at their house briefly until they found their own place—Osman had mysteriously decided she needed a few of her own personal ODSs that she could trust. Being CINCONI she could have whatever she wanted, her word was law and she had finally made it work out. People probably gossiped, but that was something Serin Osman cared very little about.

If people had known the two enlisted members were sleeping in the Admiral's guest rooms it could have been a scandal, had she been anyone besides Serin Osman. No, her predecessor's reputation did well for her in that regard—no one would dare cross her, she did what she felt was best and played politics when she deemed it convenient or beneficial to her agenda.

When Naomi couldn't sleep, she found comfort in the stars.

The stars on Earth were different. The constellations were a new adventure for her to learn and she felt at peace as she looked up at the sky. She felt the grass under her palms and the wind blew through her hair.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

She didn't look, she had recognized the footsteps well before she had heard his voice.

"Vasya," she whispered, still looking up at the sky. He sat down next to her.

"I heard you get up," he said softly.

"Couldn't sleep," she replied. She hadn't even changed out of her pajamas to go outside, nor had she put on shoes.

"I understand," he said. "That's why I usually have this on hand," he held up a rather large bottle filled with clear liquid.

They sat in a companionable silence for a few minutes.

"This isn't the sky you grew up with," she said to him quietly.

"Nope. In Mother Russia the stars are so bright and so clear—there isn't half as much light pollution as there is here. You sip vodka and look up, keeps you warm in the cold," he took a pull off the bottle without even wincing. "My mom sent this to me, makes it in our house," he chuckled to himself.

She looked over to him, the moonlight on his face and the slight

flush the alcohol was giving him.

"Do you mind sharing?"

Retirement was hard. Sometimes she felt aimless-working for Serin was all that kept her sane, all that made her still feel relevant and stopped her from thinking of her father and family constantly.

He passed her the bottle wordlessly and she took a larger swig than she should have, gagging a little, her face scrunching up.

Vaz started laughing and she felt a surge of embarrassment.

"I suppose Spartans don't learn to take liquor the way we ODSTs do," he teased.

She glared at him—a challenge. She looked at him and took a significantly longer pull off of the bottle, this time anticipating the burning sensation, she swallowed the liquid fire without so much as a wince.

He laughed and took the bottle back from her. "There you go, that's how we teach our kids to drink back home."

She chuckled a little, enjoying the warm sensation blossoming in her chest.

She started explaining constellations to him, her inhibitions fading away as she lost herself in the folklore of this planet and its own unique view of the sky. When she was a little girl, the stars had been about stories. Now it was beyond that. The sky held freedom, the sky held transcendence; a way to exist as something both physically and metaphorically: a physical arrangement of stars into patterns that were metaphor and fantasy.

They laid down, their bodies creating indentations in the tall grass—her arm was twined in his own and she hardly thought of it.

After about a half hour, she ran out of stars for a bit and just looked up.

To think that this very sky has held within it so much pain, so much destruction, so many dying breaths, she thought to herself.

"I could listen to you talk about the stars forever," he whispered. He started tracing circles on her forearm absent mindedly.

"Why?" she whispered back.

"It makes a different place. It's simpler and it's beautiful. Creates beauty out of the mess really up there. When I look up I think of you."

She felt bashful at how forward he was. She knew he thought of her and thought of her often but in what capacity she could almost never be sure. She hardly understood what she thought of him. She knew he was important. She knew she cared for him and that she would do anything for him. Was that enough?

She turned on her side so she was facing him instead of the sky.

"Vaz?"

He turned over and propped himself up on his shoulder but didn't let go of her forearm.

"Hmm?"

"I was wondering something," she said even more quietly.

He looked at her, inviting her to continue.

"It's kind of silly," she looked away from him awkwardly.

"I'm sure it's not," he replied.

She was going to lose her nerve.

"What's it like to kiss someone?" she asked slowly.

She didn't know why the thought had been bothering her for so long—perhaps since she had retired it had all finally started to hit her, everything she had missed. Everything that she had never experienced as a Spartan was all abundantly clear to her. After meeting her father it had opened up a floodgate, a well of emotion that she could only think of as grief. After the grief had finally lessened, after she had mourned for her childhood, she began to wonder about the other things she had missed.

He felt himself flush. He could talk about much more vulgar, blatantly sexual acts than kisses with almost anyone and he could walk into a strip club without any shame but the idea of talking about a kiss with Naomi of all people was somehow embarrassing to him.

Naomi was special. She was everything.

"It depends, I suppose," he said quietly.

"On what?"

He struggled for words. "How much you like the person, whether it's something quick and fun or if it actually means something."

"Quick and fun?" she questioned awkwardly.

"Yeah, like...if you just want to kiss someone for the sake of kissing someone, think they're hot or whatever, that's just fun," he continued.

Her hand was on his wrist and she could feel his pulse race a little more quickly than it had a moment ago.

"What makes it mean something?"

Vaz averted his eyes.

"If you love someone, I suppose."

"Have you ever been in love?"

He hesitated.

"I don't know," was all he could respond with. Life was confusing. He wasn't sure he knew what love was anymore. Was it watching your buddies die? Was it doing things you didn't want to for others? Fighting for the greater good? Forgiveness? Perhaps it was more simple like a pretty girl and her smile. Maybe it was all of those things. Everything seemed so subjective to circumstance.

"Oh," she said quietly. She closed her eyes for a moment, thinking.

"Vaz," she said even softer than before, barely a whisper.

"Yes, Naomi?" he used her name, speaking as softly as she had, almost as if speaking any louder would shatter whatever was happening between them.

"Could you kiss me?" she asked slowly, opening her eyes and looking at him. "I want to know what...what it would be like," she explained.

He reached over to her, placing his hand on her cheek. She didn't flinch or even react, she simply looked at him with those big, grey eyes. He noticed a few blades of grass were stuck in her hair. He wanted to take care of her, he wanted to protect her, he wanted her to have anything she wanted.

"If you want me to I could," he responded.

She moved closer to him, her face close to his, staring into his eyes. He could feel her breath easily from their proximity.

"Would it mean something to you?"

He felt a strange sadness overcome him-she had experienced so much and at the same time so little. She was with him trying to understand something so fundamental that she had been robbed of. Out of everything that had been taken from her—her father, her childhood, her body, her choices—a kiss still seemed particularly wrong. She should have been the prettiest girl at her school kissing a boy underneath the bleachers at a sporting event. She should have memories of friends and laughter. She should have memories of her first boyfriend and him meeting her mom and dad for the first time and memories of her first heartbreak. Instead she had two wars and the ghosts of other Spartans that haunted her along with the faded impressions of the life she should have lived, the life that had been taken from her.

"_You_ mean everything to me already, Naomi," was all he could say. It was true. He knew her and she couldn't have been more dear to him as it was.

"Even without a kiss?"

"You are everything a kiss could be and more," he said, running his thumb over her cheek.

"Show me," she demanded.

He pressed his lips to hers slowly and softly, a ghost of a kiss that could almost hardly be considered a kiss at all. He was so gentle, so tentative, so very afraid of hurting her, of ruining whatever it was between them.

She kept her eyes open and she pulled away quickly, slightly shocked at the sensation of his lips on her own. She looked at him. She didn't know what that had made her feel. It wasn't an overwhelming or tingling sensation but it was

Warm. She felt safe.

She brought her hand to frame his face, their arms were now crossed and she pulled her body closer to his.

"Do it again," she stated. She wanted this experience-she wanted to feel more of the warmth, more of the intimacy and more of his care.

She could see a flicker of doubt in his eyes so she leaned in and kissed him herself, this time pressing her lips to his more fully. She closed her eyes and let herself feel everything about it. She felt his lips and their chappedness and the rough pad of his thumb on her cheek. She felt his heart beating quickly in his chest as it pressed firmly against her own heart and its own steady rhythm. She even noticed the scratchy stubble on his cheek.

She felt herself blushing when she pulled away from him after a long moment.

She started to giggle. It was a strange, foreign feeling. It was so simple, so freeing.

He smiled, "Am I such a bad kisser you can't help but laugh?"

She shook her head quickly. "No, not at all," she responded worriedly, though she supposed that she wouldn't have known either way.

He ran his hand through her white-blonde hair and she closed her eyes-his fingers on her scalp felt nice in a different way. He continued to touch her soft, fine, hair and really look at her, finally allowing himself to fully appreciate how beautiful she was, a concession he had never even thought to allow himself. Up close she seemed so _normal _and at the same time so extraordinary. From her pale skin, soft eye brows and high cheekbones to the random scars on her face and neck he thought her so beautiful in the most genuine way he could imagine. Even more than any specific feature though was her serene expression-she looked as content as he had ever seen her and it made her glow.

He kissed her again, this time not quite as softly and the slightest bit more insistent.

She gasped, slightly surprised at the difference from the other kisses. It was difficult to not be able to predict where or how someone was going to move or act-she was used to understanding all

things physical and being able to provide an appropriate counteraction, but this was unpredictable for her. It was both terrifying and exhilarating.

He hoped that it was okay to kiss her again—he didn't realize how addicting it would be. Her innocence and sweetness consumed him. He'd been with many women and enjoyed it plenty but this was something completely different. It was simple yet simultaneously more intense than anything he'd ever felt with another person—her vulnerable shyness along with her reactions were so purely honest that it amazed him. He didn't know people could be that true when the world seemed like such shit most of the time.

He had no idea how she could still be so innocent and naive after everything she had experienced. The blush on her cheeks and the shy way she would approach him for another kiss was his evidence of not only her curiosity but her true ignorance to anything of this nature. It was what made her who she was and it was what he desperately craved from her. Part of him felt that he had no right to want anything from her, that she had already given more than anyone ever should, but he knew he didn't have the power to turn away anything she freely gave.

They laid like that for what must have been an hour, their limbs fully tangled up in the others sharing the most tender, wonderful kisses that he could have possibly imagined in between smiling and talking. It was so strangely simple yet more intimate and personal than anything he'd ever experienced.

It was overwhelming for him. He could have never guessed that holding her and seeing her cheeks flushed with the glow of his attention would have affected him so strongly.

"Vaz?" she asked him in between kisses.

"Yes?"

She snuggled into his shoulder as she rested her head on his chest—he was laying on his back again but she had stayed on her side, her arms wrapped around him.

"I don't know how this feels for you, or for anyone...normal," she said the word normal like she was ashamed, it was something she could never, ever be, "After everything with my father, I used to think if I had met you in another life that we'd be able to have something or be something but being a Spartan somehow prevented me from that," she inhaled deeply feeling every bit of sadness that realization had made her feel, "but I think I do love you. In whatever way I can I think I really, truly do. I don't want to live my life based on what ifs and maybes, I don't want to live in my broken past, lamenting the things I was supposed to have. I want to live now, I want to do things and I want to be true to myself," The way she whispered sounded like both a prayer and a secret, a hope that this secret could be something true, something wonderful instead of a terrible, crippling burden.

There was no doubt in her mind that she loved him now. It felt good to be honest not only with him but with herself. She knew she could love him. It wasn't painful, it didn't mess with the hurt that already existed inside of her. No, loving him could be independent

from that. Whatever this love was, it was her love to give and it was the best she could do. She felt safe with him. She felt good with him. Above all, she knew she could trust him. She could trust him with her fragile, wounded heart.

"I don't know what I can give you. This is nice for me but anything else might prove...difficult." She was tryingâ€"she wanted so badly to give him things she couldn't, things she felt he deserved. He deserved children and a home and a wife, things that, in another life, she would have been able to freely give. It seemed impossible now, after everything, after the loss of her family and after her life as a Spartan.

Part of her knew it was too simple and that her life would never be simple. Somehow there was still a tiny part of her that desired the mundane more than anything, no matter how well she hid that from herself. It was too painful to linger on. It was scary to think aboutâ€"she didn't know what she could expect from herself.

She now knew that she liked his touch more than she had thought she would. It wasn't like sparks and rainbows, she knew that that hormonal reaction would be difficult for her, that desire had been taken from her like so many other things. But the safety, trust and comfort he could provide was not beyond her. She didn't know if that was what laid the foundation for sexual relationships. She didn't know if that was something she could ever be capable of. She also wasn't sure how she was already thinking of that when this evening was the first time she'd ever been kissed.

"Naomi," he said, his voice a little hoarse, "I'll give you anything. I'd be crazy to turn away anything you offer me," he paused and twined her fingers with his own, "I love you too. Whatever you want that to mean, whatever you want that to be, is fine with me."

She smiled at him, her whole face softening with his declaration. He could see the stars she loved so dearly in her eyes while she looked into his own. If that look was all he would ever receive from her ever again he knew that that would have been perfectly fine. He could die happily knowing that she had looked at him, even just once, with those stars in her eyes.

"I feel so free," she whispered, smoothing her hand over the scar on his face.

Freedom was all he had ever wanted for her.

Maybe that's what love was.

Serin looked at Naomi. She considered herself a perceptive person and it was amplified tenfold with Naomi. When you had gone through what they had gone through together, both as children and as Kilo-5 you could read someone pretty well.

Naomi's expression was soft, contemplative and most of all ridiculously happy. To anyone else she may have looked simply okay but Osman knew that she may as well have been shouting from the roof tops her feelings for the guy.

"Wow, whatever he's doing to you he's doing it right," she teased lightly.

Naomi shook her head, snapping out of her own thoughts and promptly flushed a bright red.

_I am so happy I'm not fair-skinned, _Serin thought to herself.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Um, yeah. You look, what's the expression, over the moon," she said. She had started to absent mindedly stroke Joan's hair as she breathed deeply in her sleep.

Naomi groaned and buried her face in her hands, clearly embarrassed and flustered.

Serin chuckled softly. It was funny seeing her so distraught over something so _normal. _

Naomi sighed. "I can't help it, he treats me so...normal. I've never felt so comfortable with anyone, even Spartans or you. He just understands me better than I even understand myself, I don't know how he does it. He always knows how I'm feeling even though it feels so overwhelming and complicated."

"He's a good guy, he'd do anything for you. You deserve any happiness you can getâ€"you've earned it. This is what I wanted for you, what I wanted for all of us," she looked down at the little red head in her arms. "John, even though he's gonna be pretty shaken up when he comes out of my office, has made himself pretty happy, got a little wife and kid, probably a house with a picket fence somewhere. He's a bit of an overachiever but I think you deserve a little bit of ODS'T affection if that's what makes you happy."

"It's just a lot. I feel so deeply for him but I know I can never love him the way a real," she fumbled for the right word and everything felt awkward, "I guess girlfriend would. I don't want a house with a white picket fence and a baby. I don't want to lie to myself, I feel like if I did what John has done that I'd just be creating this artificial life to try and cover up what I feel like I've been denied. I don't want to use other people that way."

Osman understood. They both understood what it was like to be used by everyone around them. She understood her logic perfectly. She knew that she herself would never have children. Aside from the fact that there were plenty of children needing homes already, she knew she wouldn't be able to handle not having control over her body like that. The idea of her body changing and being completely out of control again was too much for her. It was out of the question.

"Look, if Vaz was looking for someone to sleep with he could flash that scar at any bar in Sydney, tell a story about grappling with a hinge-head and have some hot little biddie between his sheets so fast it'd make his head spin," Naomi's face got pale, clearly bothered by the visual she'd gotten.

Naomi was surprised at the overwhelming jealousy she felt at the mere idea. She didn't know why she should careâ€"she wasn't interested in an overly sexual relationship outside of cuddling him and some kissing himâ€"at least she didn't _think _she was, but she had

already felt a hundred things she had never thought she was capable of in the past few weeks. If he had wanted to find that somewhere else it should have been okay with her but something about him being with another woman and having her know him like that was wrong on so many levels to her. After everything they'd said there was no going back on that, she knew that the words were important.

I love you.

That wasn't something you could just _say. _

Serin continued. "If he is pursuing anything with you that's clearly not what he wants. He wants to be with _you_. Yeah you're a total hottie but I guarantee he's more interested in Naomi as a person than Naomi as a leggy blonde."

Naomi folded her hands and looked down. "I know you're right and he's told me as much, I just still can't help but feel guilt."

"I feel guilt every day—we were raised in guilt, it's all we know. We need to keep on dealing with the hand we've been dealt, we have to try and accept what reality is and understand that we're all going to struggle. That's what retiring the Spartan-IIs was all about—each of us are fighting a battle and it's different for each individual. We have to figure it out for ourselves. We can try and reason and we can have support, like how I have you and you have Vaz but ultimately we're alone. It's a journey and it's not easy but you're doing the best you can and that's what counts."

Naomi smiled softly.

"Serin you always know what to say."

Serin smiled. It made her feel good. Naomi never lied, she was honest in her words.

"I'm an Admiral, remember, that's why I get paid the big bucks. It'd be a little ridiculous if I didn't have a few tidbits of knowledge every now and then."

Naomi looked at her friend and the little girl that was sleeping on her lap.

"What in the world do you think is going to become of her?"

"Well, she'd probably make the best Spartan in the history of mankind, even better than her dear old dad but I have a feeling he's not going to be too keen on that idea in a little bit," she toyed a little bit with the little girl's ponytail.

Naomi nodded. If she had children, she wouldn't want them anywhere near the UNSC let alone as a Spartan.

"In Halsey's journal she talked about how _great_ each of us were, how _special_ we were and how we all would've been great leaders, the Alexanders and Churchills of our generation. I think she'll probably be like that, her own form of extreme glory and greatness completely independent of anything we all could have known," she paused, "or maybe she'll be a librarian or school teacher, making greatness on a smaller but equally important level, but who knows," she quipped

sarcastically. "No matter what she does she's going to make a difference, I don't expect her to fade into obscurity."

Naomi knew one thing was for sureâ€"that was no ordinary little girl.

"It's pleasant to think ofâ€"that she could have been one of us and John is raising her. She will be destined for greatness but greatness of her own choosing," she replied somberly.

Serin nodded. "It all comes down to choice. She's got a pretty amazing dad and I'm sure her mom rides the line between brilliance and being an absolute freak to capture someone's heart as completely as she seems to have his."

"Did you ever see pictures of Cortana?" asked Naomi.

"No," she said. "Does the kid look like her?"

"Not really, she's all John. Cortana looked like Halsey. A lot like Halsey."

Serin couldn't help but shift the child in her lap and get a good look at her face, staring long and hard, not quite sure what she was looking for. Perhaps she was looking to make sure that this wasn't somehow a replica of their mad-scientist. She had no idea why it was important but it was.

"Naomi, this is a pudgy, tiny, cherub version of the Master Chief. If that's not some sort of cosmic joke I don't know what is," she laughed. It was a little funny, the idea that such a fierce looking man had a doppelganger in a child sucking her thumb.

Naomi laughed a little, it was pretty humorous.

"John's kid through and through, I probably still wouldn't believe he had a kid if it weren't so obvious. John was always Halsey's favorite, I'm sure there's some really weird psychological thing that's all wrapped up in that, but that being said, we both know that AIs aren't replicas of their donors," she thought of BB and how he had worried about being a good person in his 'past life.' "I'm sure she's a wonderful gal and John made a very distinct point that she's not Halsey. I don't think he knows how much she bothers him and I don't think he ever will. Probably a good thing that at least one of us doesn't wanna put a bullet in her head."

"We'll see how he really feels when he gets out of that room," Naomi replied ominously.

_We'll see. _

* * *

><p>This story is very much about Spartans and exploring their various relationships. This way, I have Fred and Kelly, (Spartan-IIs,) Lasky and Palmer (Spartan-IV,) John and Cortana (They're kinda there own thing,) and now Vaz and Naomi, regular military guy and Spartan-II who very clearly doesn't want to take the route that Fred and Kelly took. It's a pretty interesting relationship and there really is entirely too little of them written

in the Halo fandom.<p>

THAT being said, you all should really check out ****Cor Tenebrae****. Not only is there great fanfiction written I would say MUCH cleaner and more intricately than my own but it's just great to read! Also a lot to choose from, from huge stories to one shots it's all covered. If you like Vaz/Naomi from what I've written, that's there too!

Next chapter we get back to John, your patience will be rewarded. Until next time!

23. Chapter 23

He had been taken in his sleep rather peacefully. His parents hadn't even noticed that he'd been replaced in the middle of the night. His flash clone died very shortly thereafter and his sister was born quite some time later. She had her own file that he could have viewed but he felt that today learning about himself might be enough.

His mother and father had been spied upon for quite a few years afterward. There was even video footage of them, some flagged as important. He selected one that was before he was abducted

His mother had dark brown hair. She looked very young and was wearing a blue dress and a scarf wrapped around her neck. He looked at the little boy running ahead of her.

"John Thomas _wait_!" she yelled and the boy didn't listen. She ran quickly and snagged the boy's hand.

"Mom!" the boy fussed and tried to tear his hand from hers.

"John, look at me when I'm talking to you," she said sternly. The boy stopped wiggling around and scowled at her as she got down on one knee. Her expression was stern but as she looked at him she softened a little bit.

"What's wrong John, are you nervous to meet with your teacher?" she asked softly.

"No, Mom," he said rolling his eyes.

"It's okay if you're nervous," she said.

He sighed.

"I'm not _nervous_ Mom," he said exasperatedly.

"Is there something you should have told me? I won't be mad if you tell me now, but I'll be pretty annoyed if I get a surprise," she said.

The boy fidgeted and avoided eye contact and the woman gave him a knowing glance.

"John," she prodded.

"Okay, okay, I _might_ _have_ pushed Greg Townes on the playground and given him a bloody nose today...and last week I got into a fight with

Tim Paggon..."

"John," she said frowning—"this clearly wasn't the first time this had occurred.

"Tim deserved it, he called me a loser and Greg was going to beat me at Gravball!" He protested.

She ran a hand through her hair, clearly somewhat frustrated.

"You know that isn't okay, it's not okay to get into fights and hurt other kids," she watched him look down and frown, she could tell he felt at least a little remorse.

"I'm glad you were honest with me, let's go in and see what your teacher has to say."

The footage continued into the school building.

How long were they watching me beforehand?

"Hi Amelia, it's so nice to see you," she shook hands. John observed that his mother had a tight, fake smile as she greeted the teacher, he didn't think that she was really happy to see her. "Hello John, please sit down," said the shorter woman who was presumably his kindergarten teacher.

"Wow, it's been a long time, I can't believe that I ended up being John's teacher, how have you been since High School?"

"Oh I've been well," his mother laughed, though it didn't really seem genuine.

"Did you end up going to University of Cygnus like you had planned? I know you got one of those track scholarships."

His mother frowned for a quick second but then masked it with a fake smile.

"No, I ended up getting married after school, sometimes plans change," she said cheerily, putting her hand on the boy's shoulder affectionately.

"Oh well that's very nice," the teacher replied flippantly as if she didn't think it was very nice at all.

The teacher laid out a portfolio of crudely drawn pictures, lines of letters and basic arithmetic.

"John is very bright and easily ahead of the class when it comes to cognitive abilities. However, I have some concerns about his behavior. He interrupts and gets into fights a great deal out for recess, I've had to keep him inside a few times," she said looking down at the file.

"I'm really sorry, it's been difficult at home lately and I think it's been affecting John. His father is in the Navy, you see, and he's been gone for the past few months. I've noticed John has been acting out a little more than normal," she said quietly.

The boy crossed his arms and looked away.

"Oh, the _Earth_ Navy?" asked the teacher, looking at his mother.

His mother frowned and looked a little irritated and even offended. "Yes, as far as I know that's the only Navy there is, the UNSC," she said folding her hands on the table.

The teacher seemed to roll her eyes a little. "Well, change is coming, we don't know when but it is. You should really consider where you grew up and think upon that, think about where you come from."

His mother frowned and clenched her jaw. She looked very angry, like she was holding back from breaking something.

"I'm not really interested in what you're talking about and neither is my son, and I don't appreciate your implications about my husband's line of work. If you don't mind and if you don't have anything else related to my son's education we'll be going now," she said heatedly, grabbing John's hand and walking out of the room without so much as a goodbye.

"Mom that was _awesome_!" exclaimed John, jumping up and down.

"That bitch, she always thought she was better than everyone in school, who does she think she is, she _knows_ _I_ got knocked up after high school, everyone knew about it, just wants to rub it in my face, now she's some Insurrectionist _psycho_ talking shit about my husband, remember where you grew up my _ass,_ " she muttered to herself as she rifled through her purse and pulled out a cigarette. She lit it nervously, her hands shaking with both anger and anxiety. She puffed at it irritably for a moment, clearly ignoring the no smoking signs posted on the school.

"Yeah, she is a bitch," agreed John.

His mother's eyes widened. "No, no, no, don't say that, I shouldn't have said that, don't call your teacher a bitch," she was clearly on the verge of tears. "God I'm the worst mom in the world," she groaned. She looked up sadly at the sky that had darkened quickly from the light orange it had been before they went into the school, "John, I miss you, I suck at this without you," she whispered, starting to cry.

"Nah, Ma, come on, don't cry," he said tugging at her shirt. "I won't call Ms. Schultz a bitch again, um, except for when I just did, that was the last time," he said.

She dropped her cigarette, grabbed John and embraced him while she started laughing and crying.

"Oh John," she sighed, "I don't know what I'm going to do with you."

"You're the best Mom in the whole world, probably the whole galaxy! I'll try to be a better kid and push kids on the playground less," he whispered, hugging her back, "and Dad will be back soon, we get to check another day off on the calendar when we get home," he

comforted.

"I know sweetie, you're right," she sniffled and wiped at her eyes. "You're the best son I could ask for, even if you can be trouble," she kissed him on the forehead and ruffled his hair. She sighed and stomped out the ember on the still lit cigarette. "I need to quit these, it's a stupid habit. I think we could both use some ice cream," she said smiling down at him.

"Now you're talking!" He agreed, jumping up excitedly. "Can I get a bunch of toppings?"

"Hell, as many as you want," she chuckled. They walked out of the camera's range and the video cut out.

He couldn't stop watching, he clicked another video.

Sobbing. Not just crying or upset but grief stricken, bone chilling cries that made his stomach turn.

"My _baby, _my John," she sobbed. On and on it continued.

"I know Lia, I know," he heard a man say. The camera focused and his mother threw herself onto their bed and continued to sob. She looked like an absolute wreck—her hair was everywhere and her face had red marks all over it like she had scratched herself.

The man, who John assumed to be his father, sat on the edge of the bed. He had the same red hair that he did, John couldn't help but touch his own hair.

"He was just," she hiccuped, her voice hardly able to form words as she shook with sobs, "he was so perfect, he was so _fine_ until a week and a half ago," she spoke quickly and sounded crazed. "And then he just," she gestured with her hand as if she was throwing something into the air, "he was _gone,_" her voice tapered off and she collapsed into sobs again.

"I just missed so much," he started crying too. It was clear that he had been trying to keep it together but it wasn't working anymore.

John watched them both cry for what must have been a solid fifteen minutes until they stopped for a little bit—John assumed that there was only _so _long someone could weep.

"I didn't deserve him," she said blankly.

"That's not true," his father said, resting his hand on her shoulder.

"I'll never forget him," he heard his mom whisper. "He was my boy and no one can take that from me," she said resolutely.

_They did though, they took me from you and I don't remember you. _John frowned. It hurt hearing her say that, he wished that he could genuinely remember her, even if she was dead now. It seemed wrong that he had been so loved, so cared for and left such an obvious hole in the lives of two people when he didn't remember them at all.

"Maybe we were only meant to have him for a little while," his father said softly.

It made John's stomach turn. The words were meant to be comforting but he found it unsettling.

"_No,_" his mother almost growled. "He was my _son_. He was meant to be mine _forever_. Mothers shouldn't bury their children," she said, her hands balled into fists. She punched at the wall. John watched with his father as she punched the wall until her knuckles bled and she collapsed into tears again.

"It's not _fair,_" she continued to cry. "It's just not _fair."

—

The video clip ended. John continued through the archive and was shocked.

How long did they continue to watch these poor people?

He forwarded all the way to the last video that was dated about eight years after his abduction.

His mother looked older, her hair was long and pulled into a ponytail.

She was very clearly pregnant.

"When are you due?"

"In about two weeks," she told her friend running her hand over her stomach. "Did you know when you're pregnant you're supposed to take folic acid as a supplement? It's supposed to prevent against birth defects and deformities," she said lightly.

"Well you look really healthy," said her friend as she sipped her coffee.

"I'm telling you Jo, there is _so _much out there you can mess up with a pregnancy, it's really crazy! I didn't know _anything _my first pregnancy, I was a dumb eighteen year old, but now I'm doing all of that prenatal stuff. Not a sip of alcohol, no sneaking cigarettes, none of it!" she smiled and rubbed her stomach. "You're gonna be such a happy, healthy baby," she looked down and smiled widely.

_She thinks she did something wrong, she thinks I died because of something she did. _John continued to watch her make small talk with her friend. She had a lovely smile and seemed overall like a nice woman, if not a little eccentric. He almost felt like he could get to know her. It was strange, it was like observing a stranger, a stranger that he knew was his mother. He couldn't help but want to know her, to understand what it had been like to have parents who loved him and took care of him.

_Why are they still filming her? What could theyâ€"

No.

John stopped the video and scrolled through the description of the footage.

Spartan John-117 (Black) survived all surgical augmentations, receiving vitality scores of 9/10. Spartan excels ahead of class and is ranked in top percentile. Observe Black Child B as potential candidate.

"No," he said aloud.

_That's sick. _He felt appalled at the idea, that his sister had been targeted in-utero as a Spartan candidate. It was morally abhorrent.

John moved onto Reach and the actual Spartan indoctrination. He looked through photos-they looked like mug shots, like he was a prisoner. His eyes were filled with rage week after week. He watched a video where he was electrocuted for biting an instructor.

He continued to watch videos and he found his memory filling in gaps, triggered by the sight.

He was wearing a paper gown when he walked into his initial evaluation with a young Dr. Halsey-her hair was black and he couldn't help but see her resemblance to Cortana. He saw his six year old self sit down on the chair provided.

"Good afternoon," she said looking at her clipboard.

The boy said nothing. He simply stared at her, his eyes filled with the same hatred he had seen in the photos. She continued to ask him questions and the boy stayed completely silent.

Week after week this repeated itself. She started asking questions that he knew were intended to make the boy angry, but the boy was already angry. He just stared at her. He refused to speak, he wouldn't play her game. One time he spit on her clipboard before he left and got prodded but he hardly cared, it was worth it to see her stupid face scrunch up in disgust.

He found night vision camera footage of a night in the seventh week of their indoc. He heard crying and saw movement from one cot to another.

It was Kelly. She was going to his cot. Sam was on the cot next to him and joined them on his little area. John was starting to remember.

He had hidden them under the sheets in a futile attempt to avoid being heard.

"Kelly stop crying like a baby," said Sam, clearly annoyed.

"I can cry if I want," she stated rather pitifully.

"Let her cry, just listen up dumb dumbs," His voice sounded oddly severe for a six year old. He also wasn't very nice. He outlined a plan for them to sneak away in the dining facility trash.

"But where are we gonna go? We don't even know where we are," said

Kelly woefully.

"I don't care, anywhere but here, we could go to Luna and ride on a hypercoaster, that sounds like fun," said Sam excitedly.

"I want my mom, it was my birthday and I didn't get any of my presents," Kelly whispered. John could gather that Kelly had come from a very privileged family, the way she talked had a bit of a strange lilt to it that had disappeared over the years.

"We can figure all of that out once we get out of here first. This plan is going to work, it's better than the last ones," he said smugly. He was certain. "Kelly you just have to be quick, you're the scout and Sam and I will lift the lid, Sam will help us up into it and he's tall enough to jump in if we help him."

Sam nodded and they went back to their respective cots, Kelly still rather teary eyed. John watched his younger self glance around a few times, making sure that no one was watching before he slipped his thumb into his mouth-it was the only way he could fall asleep in this place. He had given it up for a year before he'd been brought here and he hated how he knew it was making him afraid. He couldn't be afraid, he had to leave. But he needed sleep and this was the only way he could sleep.

They woke up to the usual sirens and blasts signaling that they form up for their mealtime. He quickly made his bed, he didn't want anything to look amiss on this hallowed day, he would play along. He also needed to be faster than the other kids, even if he was going to leave all of them.

They formed up and waited to file into the dining facility. John heard someone belch loudly at the front of the group-he knew it had to be Sam, he was the only one who still pulled stunts like that and was the tallest so he was more in front. John heard the telltale buzz of the prods. The sound alone made his skin crawl-it was a terrible feeling.

Sam fell to the ground and screamed initially but then started laughing. They kept prodding him until he was either laughing or crying, John wasn't sure which one. _Sam don't ruin this I need your help lifting the lid_, he thought angrily. He understood Sam's need to rebel just not his need to rebel _stupidly_.

At Kelly's signal John knew it was time, he and Sam snuck quickly out the back of the dining facility and they lifted the lid of the dumpster. Sam created a web with his hands letting both Kelly and John step into his hand, falling into the trash. It smelled foul but John didn't care, to him it may as well have smelled like daisies-it was his ticket out.

Kelly and John clumsily pulled Sam into the dumpster, Sam making some squawking noises as he flailed his legs.

"This is so gross," whispered Kelly.

"Shut up," John whispered back. She could be so annoying sometimes. They started moving just like John had planned-he had memorized the dumpster schedules for the last three weeks making sure they stayed consistent. This was it, they were going to bust out of here.

They were out of the dumpster for all of two minutes before they were found, returned back to the barracks and punished severely.

John went to his psychological evaluation the next day. He hadn't talked for eight weeks, what made that lady think he was gonna talk now?

The Doctor looked at her clipboard. Something was different about her today and John couldn't place it. He found it unsettling. She asked the same routine questions, "What is your name," "How are you feeling today," "How did you improve this week," he remained silent for all of them.

"You performed very well yesterday, John," she commented dryly.

John's confusion must have been made apparent on his face-yesterday he had almost escaped, yesterday he almost won.

"Your teamwork with Kelly-087 and Samuel-034 is really coming along, the strategy you made utilizing Kelly-087's speed was tried and true, Samuel-034's strength and height are also excellent advantages that you utilized," she mused as she wrote things down on the clipboard.

No. It was impossible. There was no way that they had known the entire time about their plan, that they had just went along with it. They had been close, they were going to leave, he was going to win.

The Doctor took off her reading glasses and set her clipboard aside, she looked at him with those eyes, those know-it all eyes he hated so much. She started to chuckle.

"John, surely you didn't think that you were actually going to escape, did you?" she said pointedly, mocking him.

Something inside of him snapped.

John watched in horror as the little boy on camera started screaming, "I HATE YOU, I HATE YOU," lunging at the doctor like a wild beast, scratching and clawing at her, anything he could do to hurt her. Very quickly a guard appeared and threw the boy on the ground. The boy had stopped focusing on the doctor and continued to scream and thrash as he clawed at his arms and scalp until he was bleeding, sobbing repeatedly "I hate you, I hate you," they shocked him with the prod but it didn't make any difference, he just kept screaming and kicking until they sedated him.

He watched as they carried him out of the room.

Dr. Halsey straightened her coat, hair and glasses and wrote something down on her clipboard.

The next week he walked into the room.

"Hello," Dr. Halsey greeted.

"Hello ma'am," the boy greeted.

"What is your name?"

"John-117 ma'am."

"How did you improve this week?"

"I made my bed faster than anyone four days in a row."

"How are you feeling right now?"

"I feel ready," the boy spoke evenly. His eyes were dead-the crazed, defiant maniac of a child from last week was _completely _gone, along with all of his determination and spirit. There wasn't a single shred of that boy left.

"Ready for what?"

"Ready to be a Spartan."

John watched in disgust as a self-satisfied grin took over the Doctor's face. This was her proudest moment-he was the last one. All of them had admitted that they were ready, ready for their destinies. Just like she had known they would.

John turned off the video. He had never felt so much raw panic in his life. He started breathing quickly and and clutched at his chest. No. This was too much.

He couldn't believe how _used_ he felt, how much he felt that something had been taken from him, how the little boy was gone forever. He thought back on every moment in his career-every moment of glory, every victory, every life he had saved.

Who was going to save him? Everything felt like a lie. He felt his world start to crash around him, he didn't know what was happening, the room was spinning.

No. It hadn't been a lie. Cortana was real, everything with her was real. That was still him. She had brought him back, she had made him John again. She had saved him without even realizing it. He calmed his breathing and ran a hand through his hair-he had started to sweat profusely. The room stopped spinning.

Joan. He needed Joan. He ran down the hallway to a conference room with an open door. Naomi calmly held Joan in her lap. John felt his chest clench up. He moved quickly to Naomi and grabbed Joan out of Naomi's arms and held her tightly to him.

Naomi watched. He looked slightly crazed as he closed his eyes and held the little girl tightly to him. He was breathing heavily.

"Daddy?" Joan questioned. He didn't seem to hear her as he held her. He calmed himself and kissed her on the forehead. He would never let anything bad happen to her. She was going to be safe for the rest of her life. She was going to be a little girl and then become a woman, just like she was supposed to. He could accept that he had lived the life he had so that Joan wouldn't need to. That was a fair trade, that was livable. He was fine letting the little boy go if he could

keep her.

"I love you Daddy," the little girl said quietly. Naomi found herself amazed by the intuitive nature of children. She obviously didn't understand why her father was upset but she knew. She watched a pained expression play across John's face.

"I love you too Joan," he rasped. His voice was tight when he spoke. Naomi watched him collect himself. Gradually, he pulled himself together and looked perfectly normal again.

"Did you have fun with Naomi?" he asked. Joan turned and smiled at her.

"Yes" she smiled brightly, "she is nice!" Joan made declarations rather than statements, almost as if she viewed her word as law. John thought it was entertaining.

Naomi stood up from the chair and put a hand on John's shoulder. "It's going to be okay. You know the truth now. Now you can try to move on."

That made the most sense. He wasn't going to dwell on what had happened, nor take time to regret it like Naomi seemed to. He was going to move on and he was going to keep his promise to Joan-that she would never feel pain like that, she would never be used by anyone. She would belong to herself and no one else.

"Thank you. For everything. You are welcome at my home anytime for any reason," he said to her quietly.

Naomi smiled. "I would like that. I am happy working for Serin, I have known her for a long time and she is a good officer and a good person. I believe in her. I know that it must have seemed harsh, forcing us to retire with very little support, but she did it to protect us. She didn't want us living with ONI watching our every move. It was the only way she could make sure we wouldn't be used as pawns again. The story protects us, it gives us a chance at some sort of normalcy. It's a heavy burden she bears-she nearly lost her position because of the amount of money invested in the few of us left, they didn't want to get rid of us but she didn't care, she forced us out, anticipating that it would be her last act as Admiral. Fortunately it wasn't. But you should know, know that she is good and that she would never authorize anything like the SPARTAN-II program again. She understands, it was her life too."

John saw that now. He had worried for years about ONI's reach-that they could take Cortana and later Joan. Now he knew that with someone like Serin in charge it wouldn't happen. He knew it was too important to her-she had earned his complete trust.

John checked his comm tab, Cortana had sent him a message an hour ago.

I hope you are okay and you find out what you need. I love you, I'll be waiting.

She had known all of this and shouldered the burden. He wondered if she looked at him as broken. He had never felt broken until now. It was a lot.

"My wife is waiting for me at home and Joan probably misses her mother, we should leave."

Naomi smiled softly. "Okay, I can escort you to the gate, make sure you don't have any problems. They were also wondering if they could get a candid photograph of us."

John sighed. His initial reaction was no, but he felt that he needed to do something in return for everything he had been given today-not only had he had access to any file he wanted, he had been afforded privacy. There was no record of his visit. He could give them a candid photograph as a favor.

They walked outside, it was rather beautiful with perfectly manicured green grass and a sunset. The photographer asked John to walk to the left of Naomi and for Naomi to take off her badge. He felt like that was strange but what did he know about photography. He propped Joan further up on his hip and the photographer just asked them to walk and talk until they got to the gate.

They were walking more towards the military side of the installation. He saw details of Spartans and Marines running in step.

A detail of Marines ran past them. A Marine in front glanced at him and Naomi, double taked and stopped abruptly, causing all of the Marines behind him to fall in a heap on top of him.

Joan started laughing wildly at their misfortune which made John smile. Naomi laughed softly, even she had to admit that it was pretty amusing. John heard the shutter of the camera and the photographer thanked them and left.

He watched a strange expression overcome Naomi's face and then, slowly, a big smile overtook her face.

John looked behind her and watched Naomi turn around to see a marine walk up to her and grab her hand.

"I'm sorry, I got out of my exercise late because we had a guy fall out and we had to do it over again, do you need to stop back at the house for anything?" he spoke with a thick accent that John could only place as slavic, very slavic.

John observed as Naomi seemed to change into a different person as she talked to this man. She seemed somehow younger. Much younger.

"I packed a bag, we should still be able to make the first train out," she glanced back over her shoulder to look at John. John watched as the marine noticed him for the first time—to his credit he didn't seem to have much of a reaction to seeing him aside from a slight flash of recognition in his eyes.

"You and the Admiral having a family reunion?"

He spoke of Osman in a _very _familiar manner, a manner that really wasn't befitting her status so they must go back.

"You could say that," Naomi turned to face John, still holding the man's hand. "Vaz, I'd like you to meet John, John, this is Vaz, he's

myâ€| " he watched Naomi go through quite the range of emotions until she blurted, "ODST."

Vaz chuckled a little at her awkwardness.

John reached out to shake his handâ€the ODST had a very firm handshake. It made sense, the guy looked severe and that was coming from himâ€he was probably used to stares and kids shying away from him. Even though John was a solid foot taller than the guy something about him was sure he wouldn't want to cross him, maybe it was the scar spanning a large portion of his face or his firm countenance but he looked like he had some real grit, something John could definitely respect.

"It's nice to meet you," he said calmly.

"Good to meet you too sir, Naomi always spoke well of you, glad to see you made it through to the end."

"Sir!" Joan dissolved into a fit of giggles, like the idea of _sir_ was simply ludicrous to her.

"Vaz this is John's daughter Joan," Naomi said.

That got a small reaction, a subtle surprised expression.

"Joan do you want to say hello?" John asked her quietly.

"We are meeting _so_ many people Daddy, you have so many friends!" she proclaimed. "Hello!" she finished. She was in a good mood from her nap.

John chuckled. "I'm working on the whole friends thing."

"My dad is the greatest dad in the whole world," she said definitively.

Vaz arched a brow. This was not a scenario he would have ever been able to imagine. John put his hand to his forehead a little embarrassed.

"She's a little opinionated, gets that from her mother," he explained.

"Joan told us earlier about how you said that her mom is 'the smartest woman in the whole world,'" said Naomi.

John felt slightly embarrassed again. _Clearly we need to get out a little bit more,_ he thought to himself.

"I guess we're ready for some lessons in humility coming up now," he said dryly, "I don't want you two to miss your train," he looked at his watch.

Naomi saw John whisper something in his daughter's ear and she smiled widely. John took a step closer and Joan leaned over to Naomi, wrapped her arms around her neck and gave her a kiss on her cheek. She smiled and waved, leaning back to her father and said "Bye!" cheerfully.

Naomi flushed at the attention Joan afforded her. It made her feel warm and happy. "Goodbye, Joan, meeting you has been more wonderful than you could ever know," she looked to John, "stay well John, take care of yourself."

"You do the same," he said. He waved slightly as Joan flapped her hand wildly in farewell. He took out his tablet and messaged Cortana:

We're on our way home.

* * *

><p>Okay little early update because I was feeling nice and because I've had a reasonable amount of time to write. But mostly because the reviews make me too excited and I want more. I'm not saying you have to review for me to post, but it definitely helps and makes me more motivated...lol.

For you anon reviewers out there I wish I could respond to you! Get some accounts y'all! :P No but thank you for your comments all the same. You're all the greatest, I hope you enjoyed this. I added a lot to this chapter before posting it, the scenes with John's mother are easily my favorite. I tried really hard to make it line up canon timeline wise and to also make it very different from Naomi and her story/experience. (Who wants to read the same story over and over again, you could just go read Mortal Dictata if you want her exact experience, I'm doing something different!) Like I said, I really hope you enjoyed it, I'm quite happy with how it turned out.

I'll be out of town next week so I'm not sure when the next post will be up. I like to have some time to look it over and get nice and ahead. :) So enjoy this and review if you have the heart. ;)

24. Chapter 24

OKAY here is the next chapter! Sorry it took a little bit, I struggled with wrapping it up and was out of town for a while.

I want to clear up my position on Halsey for y'all. I am not a fan. THAT being said, I think she is an interesting character and I think she has a lot of sides to her (like, y'know, how human beings do) and I'm not going to dismiss her as evil. I think she has a lot of problems, I think she's an extreme narcissist and a borderline sociopath with a huge ego. With that said, I think she genuinely does have care for the Spartans, even if it is largely as they are manifestations of her intellect. Kilo-5 goes to an extreme with the hatred they have for her but it's one side of the story and I think Kilo-5 have every right to hate her. I don't think the ends justified the means in the whole scenario but it happened.

I like writing Halsey. I think she's a brilliant character, but I get sick of the Halo fandom acting like she can do no wrong. I also don't think it's appropriate to dismiss her as having no love or affection for anyone or anything. So I won't write her that way. Just because someone in my story may loathe her doesn't necessarily mean that that's what I think. I'm not gonna make this story a big ol Halsey hate fest, but I'm not going to be like "Omg she's so great sometimes you just have to kidnap a bunch of kids from their parents for the

greater good of humanity, nbd." It's just not fair to do that â€" her actions very much influenced the lives of the Spartans as individuals and their families. Whether it was good or bad it happened and I think exploring the fallout of that is a large part of why this story is compelling.

I guess what I'm really trying to say to y'all is this: I will write Halsey as a real character who is morally ambiguous instead of picking one side. Because I don't think it's black and white. Lol. Just wanted to put this out there before the story keeps moving and I end up writing more with our Kilo-5 characters. You guys probably have realized how much I like spectrum and how I use characters to display different degrees of things. Each of my characters are going to have different feelings toward her because they're different people.

****ALSO EDIT: trigger warning for this chapter, violence and attempted sexual assault. Sorry I forgot to put this earlier, I really apologize! ****

With this EXTREMELY long author's note done, I give you chapter 24. I'm happy with a lot of it and I hope you all are too.

* * *

><p>Cortana resisted the urge to pace as she waited. Waited for John to come home.<p>

She had really no idea how he would react to the footage. She could see him feeling indifferent. She could see him angry. She could see him sad.

After a short eternity, the door to their apartment opened and John walked in. Joan was fast asleep. He looked fine. Wordlessly he went into Joan's room and presumably put her into her bed.

Cortana waited. She saw him walk down the hallway and into their bedroom. She didn't know if she should go to him or wait a little while.

She heard a shout and then something shattering.

She stood and walked quickly to their room where she saw John staring at the ground, looking at the fragments of what had once been a decorative piece of pottery. He looked removed from the situation, almost as if he wasn't quite sure how the pot had ended up shattered on the ground.

"I'm sorry," he said, turning away from her.

"John," she stepped over the broken clay and put her hand on his shoulder-she felt him flinch twitch as she did so.

He slowly turned to face her. The look in his eyes was physically painful for her, she couldn't describe it. She had never seen him look so weary.

She was surprised when he quickly leaned in and kissed her.

"John," she said as he continued to kiss her.

"John," she repeated, "we should talk," she grabbed his forearm as he untucked her shirt.

He shook his head. "I don't want to talk right now," he said.

She felt reluctant to let him bury whatever he was feeling.

"Please," he rested his head on her shoulder " she could feel his heart beating madly in his chest. "I promise we will talk later but," his voice wavered the tiniest bit, she wouldn't have noticed it if she hadn't known him so well, "not right now," he swallowed and looked away, "right now I need to know I can trust someone," he said quietly.

She brought her hand to his face and saw his pain that he felt so suddenly and so powerfully.

"You can trust me John," she whispered. She kissed him softly, her lips closed as she embraced him. She would let him forget for just a little longer.

* * *

><p>John laid in bed and stared up at the ceiling. Cortana was watching him as if she was worried about him doing something ridiculous. He knew he wouldn't be able to withstand her scrutiny and worry much longer. She wanted him to talk.<p>

He sighed. "Has it been hard for you?"

She frowned. "Hard for me in what way?"

"Hard for you to know what happened to me as a child. Has it been difficult to see me as a Spartan or as a leader?"

She shook her head. "John, it's not about being a Spartan, you were a Spartan and always will be...seeing...what happened to you honestly just...it made me want to protect you. I didn't want to see you suffer ever again, you had endured too much too soon."

He understood. He could see it now, the things she had done for him even early on in their partnership were done with fierce loyalty and devotion. He ran a hand through his hair.

"I think I'm okay, I think I'm going to be fine. The most difficult thing is thinking about Joan," he said quietly.

"What about her?"

"I just...I could never see her be a Spartan, never see her go through what I did. The only way I can rationalize it is knowing that because I was a Spartan, because I did my duty Joan will never have to do the same."

Cortana didn't know what she thought. She knew that the Spartan-II program had saved humanity undoubtedly. But she couldn't tell if it had been worth it. If what had been done to those children had justified the end, even if all of humanity would have ended up

destroyed. It scared her a little bit to think something so extreme. Logically it made no sense but she knew that some things couldn't be decided on logic alone.

"That's a fair way to look at it. She won't, because of you she won't even have to join the UNSC if she doesn't want to. You made a safe world for everyone. You lost more than anyone could ever imagine but this is the end of it," she said, tracing her fingertips over the scars on his forearms.

"I would never have met you," he observed quietly.

Cortana smiled sadly. "No, you wouldn't have. If you hadn't died on Eridanus-II maybe you would have met someone really nice. Who knows what a different world would look like?" That's really what it was, a different world, a world without her and John, a world without Spartans and perhaps a world without humanity. She didn't really know. _There are so many unknowns._

He frowned. A life without Cortana, a life without Joan. It was inconceivable. He had always been destined to be a Spartan. Even if it had been wrong, it had been his destiny. He was glad that it played out how it had. It brought him peace accepting this in some way.

She wrapped her arms around him. He found it strange how her slender feminine arms somehow made him feel safe, made him feel comforted. He knew he was much stronger and could defend the both of them, but it wasn't entirely about physical strength. No, she offered something else in her embrace that made him feel protected.

"Just know that I love you, I'll never leave you or hurt you," she said softly to him. She kissed his shoulder and snuggled up against him.

"I know," was all he could say. He hoped she understood that he knew, understood that it meant the world for him to trust her and let himself be loved by her. He closed his eyes and went to sleep.

He felt happy, chocolate ice cream was his favorite and he'd gotten brownies and whipped cream on top. He held his mom's hand because he knew she was sad and it made her happy when he held her hand without protesting.

"Mm, that was some good ice cream," she sighed patting her belly.

"Yeah it was!" he agreed excitedly.

"Do you wanna stay up and watch a movie? It's Friday," she smiled at him.

"Yeah, that sounds awesome," he agreed. He loved staying up late and watching movies with his mom, she made popcorn and let him eat it in her bed.

They were walking on a dimly lit street and he couldn't help but feel anxious. He didn't know why he was nervous but he simply was. Something didn't feel right.

"Hey look it's Lia Jacobs."

His mom stopped and turned around to see a somewhat scruffy looking man leaning against a wall.

"Oh, it's actually Lia Black now," she said looking over at the man, "I'm sorry, I'm having a hard time placing your face," she said a little anxiously. She pulled him closer to her " he didn't like what was going on. Something felt off.

"Yeah I _heard _about that," the man took a swig out of an almost empty bottle he had been holding behind his back.

"It's Nathan Hughes, by the way, remember Mr. Todd's Physics class," the man supplied, very clearly leering at his mother.

"Still having a hard time recalling," she said firmly. "Well, it's late so I've got to be getting home," she said confidently, clearly trying to send the message that she was leaving.

"I don't think so," the man said lowly.

He felt someone grab him from behind and rip him away from his mother before he could even yell and they were pulled into an alley.

"Let me _go _you asshole!" she screamed, kicking at him with everything she had but he had her held from behind. The man turned her around, shoved her against the alley wall and struck her hard across the face, making a resounding _smack _sound echo through the alley. The man pulled her hair and she cried out in pain.

He felt panic, he didn't know what to do, he was frozen. He watched as his mom kicked and shouted threats until the man took out a knife and held it to her throat.

"You're going to be quiet, or I'll kill that little brat of yours right in front of you and _then _have my way with you."

She glanced over at her son who was limp and terrified in the grasp of his captor, his eyes wide with fear. "Don't hurt my son," she whispered. She stopped resisting.

The man took the knife and cut open her dress. "That's what I thought," he murmured against her neck, clearly satisfied with himself. His mother whimpered.

"This is what you get for fucking some Earth-loving traitor and getting knocked up like some slut. If you're going to act like a little Colonist fucking whore you're going to get treated like one," he growled.

"John, close your eyes, look away," she said starting to cry, her voice shaking and her body trembling.

The man started kissing and grabbing at his mom. He could see tears streaming down her face and her lip quiver as she held back sobs. Something inside of him snapped, a well of rage and anger flooded through him unlike anything he'd ever felt before.

He bit down on the arm wrapped around him. The man holding him

started screaming and trying to shake him off but he didn't let go until blood filled his mouth. The man loosened his grip and he spit onto the ground blood and what was clearly a chunk of flesh.

"LET MY MOM GO YOU BASTARD!" he screamed. Blood still warm and dripping down his chin, he threw himself at the man holding his mother against the wall.

He started biting and scratching the man, ripping at his hair and digging his fingers into his eyes. He could hear his heart pumping in his head, he wasn't even afraid anymore, all he cared about was saving his mom.

"Holy fuck!" the man screamed, stumbling backwards and dropping the knife while he clung to the man's back, still digging his fingernails into his eyes and biting his shoulder as hard as he could, each time drawing blood.

"Jim fucking _help _me!" The man cried to his accomplice who was looking at his arm in shock as blood poured out of it.

"The kid took a chunk out of my fucking arm!" The other man promptly fainted, his arm gushing blood from the gaping wound.

The man finally shook him off of his back and his mother picked him up around his waist and started sprinting, sprinting as far away as she could.

When she couldn't run anymore she set him down, panting and gasping. She pulled the now useless sleeve of her dress up onto her shoulder. It kept falling down and she ignored it

"John, are you okay?" she said frantically, looking at his face and inspecting his arms. He was covered in scratches and blood along with some bruises starting to form around his neck and limbs.

"Mom I'm fine, you're hurt," he said looking at her bleeding lip and the bruise forming on her cheek. He was still scared but it hadn't quite hit him yet, he was worried the men had somehow followed them even though he knew his mom was really fast. His lip quivered and he started to cry. It was too much, it was scary. He didn't know why those men would do that or how they had gotten away, it was a blur.

She started to panic and hyperventilate but she wiped his tears and held her close to him, carrying him. "We need to go to the police station."

The scene changed to the police station.

"Look at me, I was _assaulted _in an _alley," _she yelled at the policeman. "How can you say that this was _my _fault?"

"Ma'am, it's not helping your cause that you're yelling at me," drawled the officer.

"Because you aren't fucking _listening to me._"

The officer sighed. "Look lady, you can file a report like everyone else and wait for it to get processed, but word of advice, I wouldn't

keep _advertising _that that husband of yours," he said the word husband disdainfully, "Is in that Earth Navy, people don't like that."

She filled out the form and slammed the chip down on the counter to enter it.

"There's your damn report, let's go John," she grabbed his hand and started to leave. She looked over her shoulder. "By the way, my _husband _does a more honest job blasting these sick Insurrectionist fucks off the face of the planet than you do being a fucking pathetic excuse for a police officer," she spat.

He was snuggled up in bed with his mom.

"Are you sure you're okay Mommy?" he asked looking up at her. "Your lip is bleeding again," he took the wet cloth he had gotten from the bathroom and dabbed at her face again.

She sighed and started to tear up.

"My brave little man," she hugged him to her and kissed him. "I love you so much, I'm so thankful you weren't hurt, I'm just fine thanks to you," she kissed him again.

He snuggled closer to her as she hugged him.

"Why do these people hate Dad so much?" He whispered. He felt genuinely confused, his dad was great.

She sighed. "Your father is in the United Nations Space Command Navy and the UNSC serves Earth and the colonies. A lot of people on our planet think that Eridanus II should be its own planet instead of a colony and not have to pay money to Earth for things like protection so there has been a lot of fighting throughout the galaxy. Your dad works to try and stop that because it's not right and a lot of people don't like that," she explained calmly.

He frowned. "That doesn't seem right. I don't understand why someone would try to hurt us because of that."

"It isn't right, but sometimes people are capable of bad things," she sighed. "There's good and evil all around us in all different shapes and sizes, we have to use our best judgement to figure out what's right and wrong, do you understand?"

"I think so," he replied.

"Let's get under the covers and put on a movie sweetheart," she said pulling down the bedding. "You can sleep by me tonight."

He smiled. He secretly still loved sleeping by his mom even if it was kind of babyish.

She flicked on a movie that was one of his favorites.

"Mom?" he asked.

"Hmm?"

"When I grow up I think I'm gonna join the UNSC like Dad," he said watching the opening title of the film.

"You can do anything you want John, there's no limit to anything you can do, I've known that for a long time," she kissed the crown of his head and sighed, "The world isn't going to pass you by like it did me, you're gonna be someone, make a difference somewhere and people are gonna say 'That's John Black and he's somebody.' And I'll stand up and say, 'That's my son.'"'

He woke up with a start, gasping slightly. He sat up and looked around, he ran a hand over his sweating forehead and looked at the clock, it was three in the morning.

He walked to the bathroom and splashed some water on his face.

What was that? Did that really happen?

His hand shook as he turned off the faucet. He'd never had a dream like that, never anything that realistic or detailed.

He wiped off his face and walked back to bed. Cortana stirred.

"John?" she asked, squinting at the bathroom light and rubbing her eyes.

"Go back to sleep," he said softly.

"What's wrong?" she said sitting up and ignoring him.

"It's nothing."

"You never wake up in the middle of the night," she reasoned.

"How do you know that?"

She sighed, "I just do, what's wrong?"

"I had a dream," he said stiffly.

"What about?" She was clearly concerned and put a hand on his shoulder.

John explained the dream to her, Cortana nodding here and there.

"How do I know if it really happened?" he asked after he had finished relaying the experience to her.

"Well, after looking at your file and the events of the previous day it's entirely plausible that it would stir early memories, perhaps even a traumatic one like this. We can't prove that it was exactly true unless there's surveillance which there may or may not have been, but we can start by looking to see if there was a police report filed by Amelia Black in that timeframe, you were six in 2517, so," she reached down and pulled out her computer and the projector.

She started searching through records.

"Eridanus-II was glassed, will there still be records?"

She scoffed. "They weren't kept on paper or anything, there should be traces of this stuff, I just have to find it," she found a website for Outer Colony records, "Hmm, these aren't public, hold on a second."

He watched her do what may as well have been magic to him and she gained access to the system.

"How did you do that?"

"It's so adorable that you're _still _surprised when I do this kind of thing, please, I understand programs and computers better than any human alive and probably any human ever," she scrolled and typed in his mother's name. A bunch of documents popped up.

"See here's your parent's marriage certificate, your mother's birth certificate, your birth certificate, your death certificate and here," she clicked and it expanded outwards, "is a police report from 15 May, 2517."

John started reading the document.

15 May, 2517

Elysium City Police Department

Complaint: Aggravated Assault with Intent to Rape

Accuser: Amelia Jacobs Black

Accused: Nathan Hughes and James Grouper

Scene of Alleged Crime: Alleyway by D&D's Convenience Store on Ashland Avenue

Time of Incident: 2100

Accuser states that she and her son were walking back from late night ice cream and were assaulted by two intoxicated men at the scene. After being held by knife, accuser states that her six-year-old son overpowered two men and she escaped with her son, sustaining injuries to the face and upper extremities.

Conclusion of Investigation: Inconclusive evidence. Case closed on 25 May, 2517

"Can you check if there is surveillance footage?"

"On it."

He watched her patiently for about a half hour when she found a clip.

"Here, it seems like there was one camera on the corner of that alley, the police report says the incident took place around 9:00 PM so, right about here."

John watched and saw him walking with his mother. Surely enough, they

were grabbed and dragged into the alley just like in his dream. The camera moved to focus on them and he watched his six-year-old self explode with rage and attack. Shortly thereafter his mother picked him up and sprinted out of the camera view.

"She's fast," murmured John.

"You were chosen for the Spartan program based largely on genes, she's half of that equation," said Cortana, "_and_, she's running for her and her son's lives, it's primal."

"How could the police have ignored this, she was assaulted on video, how is that inconclusive?" He asked, clearly upset.

Cortana sighed and turned off the computer.

"It was a bad time, the police were probably Insurrectionists or Insurrection sympathizers and felt that your mom got what she had coming to her with a husband in the UNSC. I'm honestly surprised they even filed the report fully."

"They should be ashamed of themselves, they completely neglected their duty to their community and service," he said stiffly.

"Not everyone is like you John, plenty of people lie, cheat, steal, screw each other over and are just generally scummy human beings," she paused and looked at him, "but I don't think your mom was, she seems like she was a great lady who would have done anything for you."

John felt overwhelmed. He knew that Cortana was right, he could tell that that woman would have done anything for him, just like he would do anything for his own daughter and for Cortana.

"If it helps anything, it looks like James Grouper got a really nasty antibiotic resistant infection because he didn't go to the doctor immediately and he had to get part of his arm amputated and Nathan Hughes sustained scratches to his corneas that blinded him for five years as he couldn't afford the flash cloning transplant procedure until then. Nothing was filed, I'm assuming it was written off as drunk violence at the hospital and that they didn't want to file charges against a six year old and open up the case to formally punish your mother's assailants. Damn, this police department was about as corrupt as ONI was back in the day," mused Cortana.

It did help, it helped that justice had been served in some sense. The thought of his mother enduring that while his father had been off fighting in the UNSC was sickening to him. As if she hadn't suffered enough in her relatively short life.

"I think I really loved her Cortana," he said quietly. "How could I have loved her so much and have no memory of her?"

"I'm sure you did really love her," she said grabbing his hand, "and that has nothing to do with you not remembering herâ€"what you went through as a child was _meant _to wipe you of those memories and feelings for your natal family. You couldn't have helped it, you were essentially forced to forget," she comforted.

He shook his head. "I still feel guilty, I feel sick that someone who

loved me so much doesn't even have a place in my mind."

What would I do if Joan couldn't remember me at all? How would that make me feel?

"There's a part of you that _does _remember her, there's nothing stopping you from finding out more. We could probably request videos from ONI, read public records and I could hack into whatever systems might even mention her name," she said softly.

That scared John too. He didn't know if he was ready for that, if he was ready to learn about that part of his past so fully, so completely. He wanted to but he didn't know if he could handle it.

"I'll think about it," he said. He took a long drink of water and sighed.

Cortana wrapped her arms around him. "I'm proud of you. This is difficult stuff, even for John-117," she said quietly. He nodded. This wasn't easy. He was now understanding why Kelly and Fred both didn't do thisâ€"maybe some part of them knew that this was too hard, made too many questions and left too much pain.

"Try and get some sleep before Joan wakes up, okay?"

He nodded and crawled back into bed. Cortana turned off the lamp and laid back down.

She wrapped her arms around and kissed him softly. She didn't say anything but she didn't need to, John understood what she meant. She loved him and that was enough.

A few hours later John heard the door open. He was too tired to get up when he knew it was Joan about to crawl into their bed like she knew she wasn't supposed to.

Instead when she crawled up through the bottom of the comforter and in between himself and Cortana he just wrapped his arms around her and held her close kissing her on her forehead.

"I can snuggle by you Daddy?" she whispered excitedly.

"Mhmm," he said without opening his eyes. She snuggled close to him and he could smell her hair and feel how soft it was. He fell asleep again.

Cortana's alarm went off for work and she sighed, pressing it quickly to avoid waking up John. She got out of bed and looked at Joan, who had snuck in unbeknownst to her and snuggled up to her father. It was seldom she got to watch John sleep, though if she thought about it she had spent over four years watching him sleep on the Dawn. Sometimes she had felt that she could watch him sleep forever, it had given her so much hope, so much excitement for what could happen next. It was different now, with him as her husband instead of her Spartan. In sleep his face still looked stern and even severe. She didn't think he was able to actually relax and she couldn't blame him. The closest she ever saw was when he looked at Joan, the way that he would smile and laugh with her or braid her hair made him look as calm as she'd ever seen him.

_I can't believe that she's almost three years old. _

She thought back to when she found out she was pregnant and the absolute terror she had felt.

_That was so silly. _

She glanced at her tablet and sighed.

She punched in a code that would send a message to all of her students.

_Hello Students, _

_My husband isn't feeling well so I'm taking a personal day. Today's homework will be due next class period. _

_All Best, _

_Cortana Black, Ph.D. _

_Almquist Fellowship Coordinator, Professor of Astrophysical Engineering _

_Department of Engineering _

_Astro Terrace, Room 707 _

_Columbia University _

_New York City, NY _

She set her tablet on the nightstand and crawled back into bed.

_I am so lucky to have two people so perfect to love. _

John woke up to the sun peeking in through the curtains which was very unusual for him. He also had a slight headache and felt stiff. Joan was starting to stir. He looked over Joan and noticed Cortana.

He turned and looked at the clockâ€"it read 0900.

_Why isn't she at work? _

"Cortana," he said. She mumbled something.

"Cortana," he said again, this time shaking her a little on her shoulder.

"Hmm? What?" she said, very clearly startled.

"Why aren't you at work?" he asked lowly.

"Mmm," she groaned, burying her face into her pillow further.

"Cortana," he prodded yet again.

"Took the day off, wanted to be sure you were okay," she said sleepily.

_People can take a day off of work? _He had never taken a day off but he supposed that when people's lives weren't immediately at risk if you weren't present it wasn't as big of a deal.

He felt guilty for making her so worried she missed work.

"You didn't have to do that," he said.

She stretched and pulled Joan close to her, almost like Joan did with her bunny rabbit she slept with and Joan snuggled into Cortana's chest.

"I know I didn't, I wanted to," she said waking up a little more but still laying down. She kissed Joan on her forehead.

"Joan, sweetheart time to wake up," she whispered softly.

"Mama?" she groaned.

John chuckled. That was one way she was similar to her mother, she didn't always wake up very easily.

Cortana smiled. She missed this over the past few months.

"Come on sunshine," she said a little more firmly.

"But why?"

"Because we're going to go make breakfast," she explained.

Joan sighed and sat up. She stretched her arms and rubbed at her eyes. John couldn't help but think she looked so cute when she was sleepy like this with her hair all messed up and her eyes only half open. He had never in his life thought anything was cute until he had a child. All of a sudden everything she did made him smile or made his heart almost skip a beat. All of these colloquialisms had never really made sense to him until he became a parent.

"I want to help," she said firmly as she started to wake up more and stood up on the bed.

"Okay, you can help," Cortana smiled.

John watched Cortana and Joan make pancakes together, Joan getting excited about helping peel bananas and sift flour.

"Ooh, look at those fine motor skills," praised Cortana when Joan pulled the peel off of a banana by herself.

"High five!" she said excitedly. Joan smiled and excitedly gave her mother a high five.

"Ten points if you throw the peel into the trash," she said cheerily opening the trash drawer.

Joan tossed it and the peel landed right on the edge of the trash and she frowned.

Cortana knocked it in and smiled. "Close enough," she chuckled.

Joan giggled excitedly. "Mom you're sneaky."

"You bet I am," Cortana agreed. "Let's count some of these pecans together for the pancake batter."

After breakfast John showered quickly and got dressed. He still felt badly that Cortana had been so worried she felt the need to stay home but he tried to ignore it.

"So, I was thinking that we could take Joan to the planetarium today, they have some really great exhibits going right now that are very interactive and appropriate for her age group," said Cortana.

"That sounds good."

"Okay, I'll call a cab, I don't feel like taking the train," she said.

The day was spent having fun. John still couldn't shake the pit he felt in his stomach thinking about his mother, which was strange because he had been taught to compartmentalize all his thoughts and feelings for when they were most convenient. He couldn't stop thinking about not only her cries and her look of terror but what her hugs and kisses had felt like. The dream had been so real.

"Daddy _look!" _exclaimed Joan excitedly. She touched a wall with her finger and it lit up displaying the entire galaxy.

"Wow, that's," he paused and looked at it "for all the places he had been, all the different parts of the galaxy and even a little outside of it, he had never once taken a moment to appreciate its vastness and how much _life _populated it, "that's really something else," he finished softly.

"Joan, can you find where Earth is?" asked Cortana.

"Is iiiiiitttt this one?" she pointed at Mars.

"No, you're close though," said Cortana moving her finger to where Earth was.

"Earth is where we are right now and way over here," Cortana walked Joan several feet to the left, "is where you were born and where we live, do you remember?"

"That's where Aunt Kelly and Uncle Fred are with Sam," she said simply.

"That's right, very good Joan," she praised.

Later they went to the park and bought ice cream. They each held one of Joan's hands and swung her between the two of them. She giggled madly, ice cream from her cone still all over her mouth.

"One more time!" she laughed as her feet hit the ground.

"Okay last time," sighed Cortana a little wearily.

After they swung her John picked her up and put her on his shoulders.

"That looks _so _ridiculous," said Cortana looking up at Joan who was surely over seven feet high on her father's shoulders.

John chuckled a little, not really caring that it looked ridiculous.

"Dad I wanna go play on the gym," she said pointing over at a playground.

He lifted her off of his shoulders and set her down. She immediately ran towards the playground. John and Cortana took a seat on the bench and watched her play.

"I can't get over how cute she can be," said Cortana watching Joan go down the slide.

"She is," he agreed simply.

"You know, we did pretty well, who would've thought we'd make such a cute kid.

"I don't see why you'd presume we _wouldn't,_" he said flatly.

"Well no, but I mean, you're you and I'm me."

"So eloquent."

She punched him on the arm.

"You know what I mean, you're so _big _and so tough looking and I'm attractive beyond compare," she flipped her hair sarcastically, "I'm just surprised at how well our genes combined."

"Do you want another?"

She looked at him, her expression grave.

"Never say that ever again."

"What do you mean?" he teased.

"Look as fun as they are to make they aren't fun to carry around like a parasite for nine months. Never again."

He chuckled.

"I agree, I don't think anyone could live up to Joan anyways."

"Now, now, I'm sure our non-existent second child would be nothing but wonderful just like Joan," said Cortana, "but they're entirely not happening. We should get you into the doctor for a quick surgery, I don't want to keep worrying about this," she sighed.

"You schedule the appointment and I'll go," he said seriously.

"Doing it right now," she said pulling out her tablet.

John saw Joan running towards him. She looked upset.

"Daddy," she whined putting her hand on his knee to get his attention.

"What's wrong?"

"That kid over there," her bottom lip started to quiver, "he told me I can't play with them and that I was a dumb dumb," she started to cry.

"Shh," he pulled her up onto his lap and patted her hair. "That's not true, you're not a dumb dumb and that boy shouldn't say things like that," he passed Joan off to Cortana and stood up.

"John," said Cortana her tone worried.

"I'm just going to talk to them," he said.

Cortana sighed.

John walked over and saw two boys who had to be at least five years older than Joan playing.

"Hey kids," he said.

The boys turned to him and John noticed that they were immediately terrified, their eyes wide as they assessed his appearance.

"My little girl told me that you called her names and didn't want to play with her, is this true?"

The two boys did something that looked like a fish when it was flopping around on dry land opening and closing its mouth until one spoke.

"I don't know what you're talking about mister," he said nervously.

John sighed and crossed his arms.

"Well, that's good. But keep in mind it's not good to be mean to little kids. Not only is it unkind, sometimes little kids have big scary parents watching," he said pointedly, "but I know you boys wouldn't worry about being caught doing something bad if you didn't do anything bad, so I'm going to go back to my daughter and try to salvage her day at the park."

He turned and started walking back towards Cortana and Joan but not before he heard one of the boys start whispering loudly: "great job idiot, I told you to leave the kid alone!"

John sighed. _Kids. _

They walked home and ordered in dinner. Joan played the entire evening until she tired herself out and fell asleep on the ground.

John sighed and gently picked her up and tucked her into her bed.

She was sleeping in a crib a few months ago.

He was amazed at how much she had already grown and the type of person she was becoming. He kissed her on her cheek and walked out of her bedroom.

Cortana was grading some assignments in the living room. She had taken to wearing reading glasses since she'd become a teacher claiming that she couldn't read as quickly without them. He laid down on the couch and rested his head on her lap. She ran her left hand through his hair and continued to do her work.

_This is my life. No matter what it took for me to get here, this is it and I'm happy. _

He closed his eyes and imagined his mother's face, remembering each detail he could from her dark hair and pale skin to the freckles on the bridge of her nose. He could remember her smile and the slight gap she had between her two front teeth.

_I'm sorry I forgot you, Mother. I'm going to try to remember. You deserve that, you deserve to be remembered. _

* * *

><p>So this one is nice and long. :) I really hope you enjoyed it. After I complete this story (someday in the very, very distant future,) I'd consider writing a story about John's parents. I really like the characters I created with them and I think it could be really interesting writing a story that takes place in on Eridanus-II during the Insurrection. We'll see. lol. Like I said, hope y'all enjoyed it. Til next time!<p>

25. Chapter 25

This chapter is a bit short because I didn't really have anywhere to break it upâ€"it was something ridiculous like 8,000 words before and I just felt like that was waaaay too long. So sorry if it seems a little awkward but this was the best way for me to put it. Hope you enjoy, I have military mumbo jumbo this weekend so review because America. :P :P (I'm just kidding.)

* * *

><p>Fall had faded into winter and it was a week before Joan's third birthday. Still in her pajamas, Cortana went out to the kitchen and looked out at the balcony to see John teaching Joan how to swim. He had activated the heating lamps to warm the outdoor balcony to comfortable swimming temperatures despite snow falling outside the balcony.<p>

She's up early for her, thought Cortana. She grabbed a mug of coffee and watched.

John was holding her underneath her belly, letting her practice floating around.

"Okay now kick, kick your feet," he coached. She started making rather ridiculous, inefficient kicks that created large splashes.

John let go and she managed to swim a few feet until she realized that she wasn't being held by her father anymore and started to panic and splash.

Cortana watched John wait a moment before he went to her aid. Joan clung to him and seemed a little angry.

"You swam all by yourself until you got scared," he said pointedly.

"No!" she said. She refused to let go of him and John decided that all productive activity was to cease so he got out of the pool with her.

Cortana smiled softly. She had had no idea how fulfilling seeing John as a father would be. He was just so good at it. She supposed that she shouldn't have been so surprised, she'd never known him to be _bad _at anything.

She handed him a towel and he wrapped Joan up.

"I think she would've paddled her way to the edge if you had just let her," she observed.

He shrugged. "Not today, some other time." He knew Cortana was right but for some reason he didn't want her to think that he wouldn't always come to her rescue-he knew that inevitably she would learn to swim and ultimately be capable of solving her own problems, but she was two going on three and he figured that that was already plenty early to be paddling about in a pool.

He towed her off and she giggled when he tickled her and messed up her hair. He set her on the ground and told her to go pick out the clothes she wanted to wear that day. She ran off like John had requested making little wet footprints as she went.

"I hope you plan on picking through her hair after you just did that," said Cortana handing John a towel for himself.

He frowned as he towed himself off. He hadn't thought about that. Joan hated having her hair picked through when it was tangled, she whined the entire time so it wasn't a fun task. Cortana smiled at his frown, stood as tall as she could and kissed him good morning, not caring that he was wet and getting her water on her pajamas.

She pulled away from him and smiled brightly, looking up at his face. "Good morning to you," she said flirtatiously.

"What are you doing today?" he asked softly.

She looked appraisingly at his arms and chest along with how the morning sunlight hit his face. _How about you,_ she thought to herself. She felt a little overwhelmed by her feelings, she usually didn't get so distracted but she supposed that the idea of staying home in bed all day was more appealing when she had to go to class.

She shook her head, she needed to rein herself in, her brain was moving a million miles a minute towards thoughts that would make her late for her first class.

She slowly unwrapped herself from him and sighed, clearly a little flustered.

"First I'm going to get dressed, then I have my Intro lecture and department meetings until the evening when I have a help session for students that have questions before our midterm on Friday," she said taking a gulp of her coffee. "You have any big plans for the day?"

"Comb out Joan's hair. Take Joan to the park. Exercise. Read while Joan naps. Call Fred and Kelly to confirm their travel plans. Wait for you to come home," he concluded. A rather mundane day that revolved almost entirely around his daughter's whims-he supposed it wasn't much different from when his day revolved entirely around NavSpecWarCOM's demands, just a lot less dangerous.

"What have you been reading lately?"

"I started A Soldier's Tale: Rainforest Wars," he said.

"I'm surprised you guys didn't read that when you had school, that's a classic," she said.

"Most of the reading we did was history and we did a lot of math and science even though we did read a few classics," he paused, "Do you know the contents of every book ever published when you were an AI?"

She nodded. "Mhmm, makes it difficult. Plenty of books have been published in the past few years but I haven't found anything really engaging. Maybe I'm just bad at finding good books."

He once again found himself amazed-he had no idea how she kept all that sorted out in her brain.

"How do you keep track of all that information?"

She shrugged. "I think that I'm not actively remembering most things, when you mentioned A Soldier's Tale, I immediately remembered the plot and everything about every edition of the book, its copy editors and the entire life story of Jeremiah Mendez, however, I wasn't thinking about it until you asked me. I think it's the same way your long term memory works, for example, if I asked you the name of the AI who guarded Installation 04, you would say," she prompted him to complete her sentence.

"343 Guilty Spark," he responded.

"Exactly, you know the answer and probably could name a few facts about him but I highly doubt you spend all day thinking about 343 Guilty Spark. At least I hope you don't," she teased.

They started to walk inside, John holding the door for her.

"I think I only had the capacity to let one artificial intelligence take up most of my thoughts," he commented.

"Well then it was most assuredly 343, he was so charming," she said walking into their room. She pulled her shirt over her head and smiled as she watched his attention shift from her face to her figure. She went into the closet and started picking out her clothes for the day.

"So you're going to talk to Kelly and Fred in the afternoon?" she asked while she pulled on a pair of slacks.

"Yes, I think Fred's gallery opens two weeks from now," he said.

She walked out of the closet fully dressed. John looked at her and couldn't help but admire what her clothes did for her figure. He never had thought much on clothing but he definitely appreciated the nice tailoring that had gone into her new wardrobe.

His gaze must have lingered for a while because she started to smirk.

"See something you like?" she said coyly, walking into their bathroom to run a brush through her hair.

He shook his head as he tried to gather his thoughts and respond in a manor that would be at least relatively witty.

"Maybe," was all he could come up with.

He went and stood in the bathroom doorway and watched her "straighten her hair." Her hair was already straight but apparently it looked more polished when she used the she set the iron down he grabbed her by the waist and kissed her.

She broke away and inhaled deeply, she put her hands on his chest.

"Clearly we're both a little keyed up. I _have _to go to work and I imagine that Joan would not understand that Mommy and Daddy want to spend the day in bed without her. So I have an idea."

"I'm listening," he murmured, smoothing his hands down to her hips distractedly. These pants did everything right. He hadn't known that pants could be right or wrong until they had come to Earth. He definitely had been missing something.

"This week is Valentine's Day, it's an old holiday created literally for the purpose of selling heart-shaped merchandise and flowers that is still rather popular here on Earth. I say that we ask some of our new friends to take Joan for the evening while _we,_" she traced her fingertip on his chest flirtatiously, "go out for dinner and get a hotel for the evening."

The idea sounded perfect. They hadn't had any semblance of alone time since Joan was born, especially considering John had also been watching Samantha a lot of the time. He'd never say that it was _exhausting_, fighting Covenant for four days solid without sleep was exhausting, but something about having puke and snot covering you at the end of the day made you just want to go straight to bed.

"Are you thinking of Tom and Sarah?" he asked.

"Why not?"

"Won't they have plans?"

"I have a feeling that you could maybe call in a favor, just this once," said Cortana. She glanced at her watch.

"Ugh, I _really _need to go if I'm going to be on time," she kissed him quickly and went to go grab her briefcase and jacket. He followed her.

"Think about it, I know _I'll _spend a large part of the day thinking about what we could get up to _alone _for the first time in _three years_," she teased as she put on her hat.

He felt his pulse spike up sharply at her words. He was usually good at compartmentalizing things of this nature. They obviously had been together since Joan was born but the idea of being _alone _even just for an evening was nothing short of exhilarating. Joan was the light of his life-he would do anything for her, but the more he thought about it the more he realized he desperately wanted time alone with Cortana.

John went and quickly dressed himself for the day. Joan's hair was a gnarled mess so he had to wet it and put some spray in it to get the tangles out.

"You need to sit still while I comb your hair," he said as she squirmed.

"I don't like it," she whined.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand you when you whine like that, you need to speak like a big girl," he said shortly. As much as he found her antics cute, even when she was misbehaving he knew he had to work on correcting her. Cortana was persistent but John knew that he let her get away with far too much.

Joan huffed and repeated herself plainly.

"Do you want to do it yourself?" He knew that she wouldn't be able to get much done and probably end up ripping out a bunch of her hair.

"No," she said quietly.

"Okay, well if you just sit still it'll go faster, then we can get you dressed and go to the park," he said.

She didn't respond and she was turned away from him but he knew she was frowning. He continued to pick her hair, which had started to get really long. In color it was more like his-she was cursed with the same reddish hair and fair skin that he had, through her hair was a bit darker than his already. In texture it was a lot more like Cortana's hair, it was much thicker than his own, though he wasn't planning on growing a ponytail anytime soon.

"Can you braid my hair Daddy?" she asked after he had finished combing it.

"Sure, how do you want it?" With her hair getting longer he had spent time learning ways he could put it. Cortana had simply said they should cut it short but for some reason he didn't want to. With that said, her hair was often a mess at the end of the day so he took it upon himself to learn various ways of putting it up.

"French please," she said excitedly.

As gently as he could he started to plait her hair. When he finished he reached into his pocket to grab a tie that he somehow always seemed to be carrying five or six of and tied it off.

"Now why don't you go dress yourself like a big girl then we can go to the park," he said. She got up and walked to her room.

John waited in the living room and Joan had dressed herself in grey and blue. She really seemed to like grey lately.

A few blocks from their home there was a nice, big park for her to play at. There were a few other kids her age. Usually Joan wouldn't ask to play but if she was asked she would play. He sat on a bench to watch her. There were a few other parents watching as well.

John watched Joan go to the top of a jungle gym and stand on top of it.

"Is that your daughter on top of the gym?"

John looked over to see a well dressed woman looking at him apprehensively.

"Yes," he responded a little confused.

"Are you sure she should be-" the woman gasped when Joan, with a loud yell, jumped off the top of the jungle gym.

John sat up slightly, watching her.

Joan, instead of crying started laughing and climbing to the top of the gym again.

John looked at the woman next to him, who was looking at him now more closely in shock.

"You're the soldier off the poster," she said quietly.

He was confused. "I don't know what poster you're talking about," he replied.

"It has to be you, your daughter looks just like the little girl," the woman fumbled on her tablet and pulled up an image John remembered well.

It was of himself and Naomi along with Joan. The photo had been edited to make the sunlight brighter and the whole shot a bit more dramatic. He looked solemn but had a small smile on his face while Naomi had a soft smile. Joan was laughing loudly at the Marines who had fallen out of formation who weren't pictured. It was a poster for a veteran resource center captioned "Heroes deserve happy endings."

It had information for a hotline and links to informational literature.

"You and your wife look so happy," she commented.

John shook his head. "Wife?" He looked at the picture again.

Oh God.

Naomi looked like his wife.

_That's _why they wanted him to stand where he had, his wedding band showed. He felt a little stupid.

"Shit," he said aloud. The woman looked at him strangely.

"I'm sorry," he apologized quickly. "I didn't know this photo was going to be used this way, Naomi isn't my wife, she's my friend. My real wife probably isn't going to like this," he said.

"Oh," she said a little shocked. She tried to backtrack. "I suppose it doesn't look entirely like that," she attempted.

John sighed. "No, it does and I'm sure that was the intention," he replied quietly.

"Dad!" he heard Joan yell. She appeared to be gesturing wildly at another child and running up to him. Shortly after a little boy followed her, out of breath. He was a little shorter than Joan.

"Mom I made a friend!" He exclaimed to the woman sitting next to John.

"Theo, what's your new friend's name?"

"My name is Joan," she said brightly.

"Looks like you've been busy jumping off stuff and making friends today," remarked John. Joan giggled.

"How old are you?"

"My birthday is next week!" she proclaimed, not really answering the question.

"She'll be three next week," supplied John.

"Wow, she's very tall," said the woman. "Theo is four," she said. Joan was already about an inch taller than the boy who was a year older than her. Just from seeing the two of them run over John could also tell she was far more coordinated, she didn't bumble or trip like most children her age did. John didn't often have points of comparison without Samantha here anymore, it was hard for him to realize how much Joan wasn't a typical three year old.

"Well, I'm a little taller than average," he deadpanned. Perhaps she didn't realize that he was a Spartan? He wasn't going to run around shouting it like his appearance usually seemed to.

After Joan's excited introduction the two children proceeded to go

play again on the playground.

"Maysilee Van de Velde, by the way, how rude of me," she spoke with an accent that John had learned to associate with wealth and her last name screamed privilege.

"John Black," he replied, continuing to watch Joan play with her new friend.

"What brings your family to Earth?"

"My wife is an astrophysical engineer who is teaching at Columbia University. We settled down in the Lamda Aurige System after I retired but she is doing a year long residency here before we go back home. Eventually she's going to start doing classes via correspondence and recruitment for the Almquist Fellowships," he said.

"I've never been outside the Sol System," she replied.

"Really?" The idea seemed odd to him considering he'd spent his entire life jumping through slipspace to various locations. He supposed he didn't really know much about civilian life and how they adapted through the wars. Earth had been relatively safe until the very end-this woman may not have even felt the effects entirely.

"Slipstream space kinda freaks me out," she laughed lightly. "Plus my husband has a rather demanding job here so it doesn't leave much time for leisurely travel, he travels a lot for business so when he's home it's nice to be home," she remarked.

John wondered what a demanding civilian job was. He couldn't even imagine what that would look like-was he being shot at?

John's pocket buzzed and he pulled out his tablet. He had a message from Cortana, attached the photo of him and Naomi.

_Damn, your wife is hot, _was all she had written. John sighed. He didn't know if Cortana wanted a response or not, she was probably pretty irritated. _He_ was pretty irritated.

"They play well together, we should exchange information and set up a playdate for them," Maysilee said, shaking him from his thoughts.

John supposed that it would be nice for Joan to have friends. Even though he had been living a civilian life for five years now he had never really interacted with _real _civilians-Fred, Kelly and Cortana most assuredly didn't count. He supposed it shouldn't be difficult-it wasn't like he and Cortana sat around talking about the UNSC constantly.

"Theo, come over here, you have your mixed martial arts class in an hour and you need to change," she called.

"But mom, I want to keep playing with my friend," the boy complained. John stood up and immediately the boy looked at him anxiously, clearly intimidated. Maybe he should have stayed sitting.

"I gave Joan's Father our information, you and Joan can play again very soon," she explained.

The boy didn't speak but nodded.

"Bye!" said Joan loudly as they walked away. The boy waved a little, clearly still a little spooked.

John felt badly. He wondered how much his appearance may affect Joan's friendships in the future. Perhaps it wouldn't matter as much when Joan was older.

They left the play park, which was in a climate controlled dome with plants and trees to avoid the cold winter weather. John dressed Joan up in her coat, hat and mittens to keep out the February cold. He held her hand and they walked the short distance back to where they lived.

He hung up their outerwear and Joan went to go play in her room. John took out his tablet and looked through some of the pictures he kept on there. He found one of Cortana snuggling Joan on her second birthday. He loved this picture, both of them were smiling and happy. He attached it and sent it to her with a caption.

He hoped that that would make her feel better.

Cortana fidgeted a little in her seat at her department meeting.

"Columbia University is starting a program where random departments will be receiving treadmills for their homes to encourage fitness, I think we got a grant or something and they want to spend the money, so if you could list a drop off time that works for you that would be appreciated," droned the department head.

Cortana held back a sigh. She couldn't help but be bothered by the advertisement she saw with John and Joan in it. She knew it wasn't his fault and that it was entirely characteristic of the military to distort scenarios like the one photographed. It just played to her insecurities-Naomi was exceedingly beautiful with white blonde hair and overall striking features. It was also very quickly becoming apparent that her daughter was more Spartan than not. John didn't really notice because being a Spartan was normal to him but Joan was very heavy, extremely coordinated and overall advanced for her age. She looked and behaved more like a five year old than a three year old.

She had messaged Kelly about it and Kelly had assured her that it was just an advertisement done by the UNSC in rather poor taste, which Cortana knew but still found upsetting.

Her tablet blinked, indicating she had a message from John.

He had sent her a picture of her and Joan smiling.

I am very lucky, he had written.

Cortana smiled widely. He really was the greatest. He didn't speak overly much but somehow he always knew what to say.

* * *

><p>Hope you enjoyed this chapter, next chapter is fun too. Have a great week! Thanks again to all of you guys who review, seriously makes my life.<p>

26. Chapter 26

Wow! Long time no speak! Started a new job and it has been craaaaaazy! I'm also started deployment preparation even though I'm not leaving for a while and that's quite the undertaking, getting all my ducks in a row-I'm sure my military readers can understand. I've still been writing though, I write on my train commute! Kinda a short fluffy chapter but I hope you enjoy!

"Dr. Black?"

She shook her head. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your independent research, how is it going?"

Apparently their department meeting had dissolved and her professor mentor was now trying to initiate their weekly one-on-one.

"It's going well," she said vaguely. Ever since she had been here she had gotten the feeling that people were very interested in her ideas, almost a little bit too interested. She supposed that one can't just revolutionize galactic travel and expect people to treat you normally.

"How is your family?"

Cortana didn't feel like making small talk but she proceeded to answer questions and make chatter, her mind miles away thinking about everything from slipstream travel and forerunner glyphs to John and their hopefully impending getaway.

John sat with Joan, correcting her penmanship as she wrote the alphabet and her numbers.

Write "Dad," he said.

"D-A-D," she slowly wrote. She was very measured, she made each letter carefully paying attention to make sure the letters were even.

"Now write Joan."

She smiled and did so.

"Okay, here's a new one," he wrote BLACK.

"What letters are those?"

She examined the letters carefully before pronouncing
"B-L-A-C-K."

"That's your second name, write Black," he instructed.

"I have two names?"

"Yes you do," he confirmed. She smiled.

"That's silly!"

John almost agreed-he had lived almost his entire life with only one name aside from a Spartan tag and a rank.

"You're Joan, but Black is a little special because me and Mommy have the same last name, we all get to share it," he explained.

"It makes you my dad?"

"Well no, I'm your dad because I'm your dad, not because we have the same last name, but it helps other people know that I'm your dad and that your mom is my wife."

She digested this knowledge.

"How about we learn some more names," he proceeded to write Sarah and Tom on her board.

"Do you remember a little while ago when Sarah and Tom visited?"

She shook her head sillily. He knew she was just teasing.

"Don't you remember the nice picture you drew?"

She shook her head and smiled at him.

"Remember Tom gave you the nice bear?"

"No," she said, starting to laugh mischievously. John couldn't help but smile, she thought most things were games.

"I remember how much you liked Sarah, remember she's tall like me," he explained.

"Yes, I liked her, I want her to visit again," she grinned, resting her chin on his knee and looking up at him.

"How would you feel if she came and spent the night?"

"I think we could have a lot of fun," she said carefully. John chuckled-he could tell she was measuring in exact amounts of 'fun' she could have. John had to wonder how you could quantify fun but it somehow made sense in his daughter's head.

He looked at his watch, it was 1400.

"It's nap time," he said quietly. Joan frowned.

"No," she whined.

He sighed. "How about we nap together?"

She sighed and rolled her eyes dramatically. "Okay," she frowned. He picked her up and carried her to his bedroom. He didn't tell Cortana about this-she was adamant that Joan not go into their room, she

insisted that it was supposed to be their private space. He knew that this made more sense but she was so stubborn and she was miserable to deal with if she didn't nap, so he figured it was the lesser of two evils.

They laid down together on his bed. She giggled, trying to distract him from sleeping by asking him silly questions and even attempting to tickle him, which didn't really work.

He patted her hair down and kissed her forehead.

"Close your eyes," he said. She did and within ten minutes she was asleep. Watching her fall asleep was one of the most beautiful things he had ever witnessed. She slept so peacefully, so sweetly without a care in the world. Sometimes he felt overwhelmed by the fact that he had been entrusted with caring for her, the enormity of caring for another life, a human life that was a part of him. She was just so important.

He wondered if his mother or father had held him and kissed him while he slept. She was so trusting. Why wouldn't she be trusting when she knew her father would do anything for her?

He thought of Naomi's father. He was sure that Naomi's father would have done anything for her as well. It pained him to think of his grief, of the helplessness he must have felt.

As quietly as he could, he got out of bed and went back to the living room where he dialed Lasky's connection.

Tom had just gotten home from work. Sarah wouldn't be home for a few more hours, her day was usually a bit longer than his. His comm tablet rumbled indicating he was getting a call.

From the Chief?

He pressed the button and the image expanded into the room.

"Am I calling at an okay time?" he asked.

"Of course," he said leaning back into his couch.

"Apparently there is a holiday on Friday and Cortana was wondering if you and Sarah would be willing to stay the night at our house with Joan so we could have an evening together," he paused. "I don't trust anyone with Joan, but she really liked Sarah, talks about her sometimes," he trailed off a little.

Tom felt a surge of warmth in his chest-Joan liked Sarah enough to request her presence.

"It's actually Sarah's birthday that day but I didn't have any plans, we were probably just going to order in dinner and go to bed. I have Fridays off because we do a compressed work week with ten hours each day so every other Friday is free, and Sarah only has to go in that morning. We could be in New York City by 1300 your time," he said.

"If you don't want to spend a holiday and a birthday with my three year old I understand entirely."

Tom laughed. "Joan is a pretty fun kid, it's kinda relaxing when you're around adults all the time, I'll double check with Sarah but I think that will work out just fine, don't worry about it," he smiled widely.

John nodded slightly. He felt awkward ending transmissions, saying goodbye felt weird so he just hung up even though that could perhaps be considered rude.

He called Kelly and Fred next.

Since it was so far away, the connection took quite a while to make until a slightly frazzled looking Kelly answered.

He wasn't used to seeing her look that way, she always looked entirely put together even when she was juggling a busy schedule.

"Hi John, hold on a second," she went out of the screen quickly and he heard a crash and then wailing.

"Samantha you know we don't run in the house and now look, you fell down the stairs and broke Daddy's favorite picture frame," he heard her sigh exasperatedly as Sam continued to cry.

She walked back into the frame carrying a crying Sam while bouncing her up and down.

"Can I call you back after I sort this out? I'm sorry," she spoke over her screaming toddler.

"Of course," replied John ending the transmission. As he did that, the door buzzed.

_Who could that be? _He cursed when he heard what was most assuredly Joan stir in the bedroom-it would have been good if she had slept at least a half hour longer.

It turned out to be a _treadmill _delivery and John couldn't help but feel very confused. Cortana came home early and looked a little frazzled as she set her briefcase down. She looked at the treadmill and groaned.

"John why would you tell them to set that up in the _living room_ when we have three rooms we _never _use," were the first words she said. Joan had taken off all of her clothes in preparation for her second elective bath that day and John couldn't help but sigh.

He had just wanted the delivery men to _leave_, Joan had woken up from her nap and been revitalized in energy-she had proceeded to take out all of her toys and construct a blanket fortress in her bedroom, nearly collapsing a bookshelf on herself in the process. She then flooded the bathroom by turning on the sink and closing the sink drain for no apparent reason and he had cleaned that up.

He felt annoyed when he stepped on a toy she had left lay. It had been the last straw when he went to go sit on a chair in the dining room. He sat down slightly annoyed which he had apparently done too quickly and the wood leg on the chair snapped clean off. He looked at

the ruin of a chair and the delivery men asked:

"Where do you want this?"

"Anywhere is fine," he said, trying to make sure his frustration wasn't entirely evident. They were still very clearly scared when they put the treadmill unceremoniously down in the living room and left as quickly as possible.

John felt himself starting to lose his temper. He heard Joan start the bathtub water like she knew she wasn't supposed to and he walked over to the treadmill that was still folded up in the living room, it had taken three men to lift it up here and he picked it up with one arm.

"Okay, where do you want it?" he asked shortly.

Cortana frowned.

"It's not very heavy but I need you to hurry up so I can make sure our daughter doesn't flood the bathroom for the second time today."

"How about we calm down, you go put it in one of the spare rooms and take a breath or two while _I _deal with our demon child in the bathroom," she said taking off her jacket.

She walked to the bathroom where Joan had unraveled all the toilet paper and taken all of the shampoo and poured it into the bathtub.

"Joan Black you will turn off the water _right now,_" she said sternly. Joan looked at her and very deliberately kept splashing water.

Cortana frowned. She turned off the water and pushed the toilet paper to the side with her foot then grabbed Joan under her armpits. Joan started to kick and whine.

"Absolutely not young lady. You might be able to pull that stuff with your father but you're dealing with Mom now and I'm not half as patient. We're going for a time out and we're going to pray that your father hasn't had an aneurism."

She wrapped a towel around her. She took her to the library and sat her on the chair but she immediately made to get off of it.

"No," Cortana said firmly sitting her down. "You need to sit for a bit. It's not okay to play in the bathroom, especially without Mom or Dad," she said decisively. "It's also not okay to take advantage of how nice your daddy is, you have him wrapped around your little finger don't you," she said more to herself. She could tell John struggled with disciplining Joan. He made rules and most of the time Joan was good about following them because she enjoyed praise but when she did decide to truly act out, largely because she had a lot of energy, John was usually at a loss.

Joan whined "Mooommm-"

"Look, you have to sit on this chair for five minutes and that time

doesn't start until you are quiet and calm. If you refuse to do that then you are going to bed early while Daddy and I have fun all by ourselves," she explained.

"No," she cried.

"Well then let's start your five minutes and then help clean up the mess you made."

Joan crossed her arms underneath her towel and glared. Cortana started a timer on her watch and sighed.

As the five minutes of quiet continued, Cortana watched Joan stop frowning and just get bored which was good, at least she had calmed down a bit.

The timer beeped and Cortana sighed.

"Okay, five minutes are up. That wasn't so bad. Now let's go change into pajamas early and then go make sure Daddy is alive."

"Dad isn't dead!" Joan exclaimed. Cortana had noticed that Joan was very literal. Oftentimes games of pretend were frustrating to her if they didn't make logical sense and ridiculous fantasies that children often enjoyed held very little draw for her.

Perhaps it's because she lives in a world of the mythical and legendary as it is, Cortana thought to herself.

"No, not yet," sighed Cortana. The man could survive two wars but raising their daughter seemed to be presenting a different challenge for him-a challenge he couldn't shoot.

John sat on the couch and closed his eyes. His comm tab had started to buzz again and he answered.

"Hi John, sorry that took so long," Kelly spoke clearly.

"It's fine, we had our own saga unfold."

"Sam say hi to Uncle John, you remember Uncle John," Kelly said, propping Sam on her lap. Samantha smiled at him softly. She seemed so sweet in disposition.

"Hi Uncle John," she said quietly.

Kelly gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Where are Cortana and Joan?"

"We're here, we just got done with a time out," said Cortana as she sat down next to John and pulled Joan onto her lap.

"Pajamas already?"

"One of those days," Cortana smiled.

Fred sat down next to Kelly.

"So we leave tomorrow, everything is all booked and I'm just getting done packing everything," sighed Kelly.

"You seem stressed," commented Cortana.

"I shouldn't be, but something about taking time off work and leaving the system for the first time in a while has just got me on edge. Sam is very sensitive to other people and their feelings so when I feel upset she starts to get upset," she ran a hand through her hair.

John remembered this characteristic that Samantha possessed. She was extremely sweet in nature but also very sensitive. He considered himself someone rather difficult to read-only Cortana or other Spartans, usually Kelly, had ever really been able to get an accurate read of how he was feeling based on observation alone, but on days where he felt even the slightest bit more on edge Samantha would pick up on it very quickly and almost seem to _worry _or cry more often. John could already tell she had a very strong intuition, much like how Kurt had always been somehow in tune with feelings around him.

"Sammy I'm so excited for you to visit my house, we will have so much fun!" she exclaimed.

Samantha smiled bashfully.

"Aren't you going to talk to cousin Joan?"

Samantha started to flush and buried her face in her mom's chest, feeling embarrassed at the attention.

Kelly chuckled and smoothed her daughter's hair down.

"Anyways, we have everything ready to go it's just a lot, but it will be great to see you all, I feel like it's been forever even though it really hasn't been in the grand scheme of things."

"We'll start planning for your arrival, we will make sure to show you a good time," said Cortana smiling. "Joan say bye."

"Bye!" she shouted excitedly. She started to hum a tune distractedly. Kelly laughed and ended the transmission.

"Now we're gonna help clean up the big mess you made," said Cortana firmly. "Go pick up your toys, start with the ones in the living room, I know you're a big girl and I can trust you to do this," she said sternly. Joan sighed.

"I am just _so _busy," she bemoaned dramatically as she started to pick up her toys.

"I know sweetheart, sometimes it's hard to be so talented," Cortana said sarcastically as she went to the bedroom to go change into more comfortable clothes.

John sighed. This had turned out to be a longer day than he had anticipated. How had he gone from saving the human race to stressing over his daughter destroying their house? Joan continued to pick up her toys.

Cortana came back changed and kissed him like she usually liked to

when she got home from work.

She pulled out her datapad and started typing something.

"Okay, so if Joan is driving you up a wall being what the Covenant really meant when they said demon," John chuckled a little at this, "I have an idea, I think she has too much energy, we should put her in a class!"

"What kind?"

"I don't know, there's everything here, you could take her three days a week to start and whatever it is she likes, but hopefully it could be something that tires her out a little bit."

John thought back to the morning at the park.

"Joan made a friend at the park, I exchanged contact info with his mother and they were leaving to go to a mixed martial arts class."

Cortana smiled. "Well there we go, get the info on the class and we can ask Joan if that sounds fun to her. Chances are she'll be delighted, she's a bit of a go-getter, I wonder where she gets that from," she laughed.

John smiled. She was getting to an age where he could really see her very distinct personality. She was very much like her mother, not only in her attitude but she was smart. Cortana had decided shortly after coming to Earth that she would start teaching Joan Italian.

John had asked, "why Italian?"

"Because it's easy and it was the first language I ever spoke in so why not?" Cortana had shrugged.

After a week, John had had trouble getting Joan to stop asking for things in the new language. Eventually Joan had learned that he didn't understand and started doing it to tease him. Her face when she joked reminded him so much of her mother it was a little unnerving.

John messaged Maysilee and after an oddly lengthy conversation-John didn't understand the lack of concision-he got the information and price of the classes.

"Wow she seems like a doozy," said Cortana laughing while she read the message transcripts.

"Are all civilians like that?"

"No, not really, I think it's part of the neighborhood here. People have a lot of money here and, unlike us, have had it for a very long time."

"Do we have enough money that we could live here?"

Cortana laughed. "You would have a heart-attack if you realized the obscene amount of money we're making right now, it's almost

nauseating. Your retirement is pretty good, an E-9 with all the decorations you have, it's a pretty sweet deal each month but the payments I get on the Hyperlight engine for the rest of our lives," she shook her head "It's absolutely ridiculous, we could probably buy a _moon _if we wanted to in a year or so. My colleagues all think I'm insane for wanting to move back to the Outer Colonies, we could buy a mansion here on Earth. When we get home we should fund a few scholarships and figure out other things to do, they don't need our money here on Earth," she replied.

It was strange to John-outside of the military money usually had a direct correlation to power, and even in the UNSC, the higher your rank the higher your pay grade. It was strange to think of their family as wealthy in a monetary sense because they had everything they could possibly need, things that couldn't be purchased.

"We should give most of it away, it's not right for us to live excessively."

Cortana snorted. "I think out of most of the people you'll bump into, _you _deserve a good chunk of change more than most, what with saving the entire species a few times over."

"You can't put monetary amounts on that, it's just not right. It was my duty."

"I understand. I didn't invent the hyperlight engine for money, I did it to advance mankind. And because I was bored," she added.

He nodded. "It would be selfish if you didn't invent things."

Cortana shrugged. "I don't think that's true, with that rationale it'll be selfish for Joan to be anything but a Spartan, she'd save the UNSC millions being ready to wear Mjolnir without augmentation," she said.

John tensed up. "We don't know if she's that strong yet."

Cortana gave him a look. "You can deny it if you want but she is your daughter in every sense, that is very plain to me. Catherine is probably itching to do some tests but I don't think she'll come near Earth if she can avoid it," she looked over at John who looked a little graver than usual.

"What are you going to do if she _wants _to be a Spartan, you have to admit the thought is going to cross her mind at least once when she starts to make some realizations."

John shook his head. "I justâ€¦I don't want that for her. I want her to make her own choices, I want her to live without expectations and duty, I want her to belong to herself."

Like he never had, were the unspoken words.

Joan ran up to them. "I've picked everything up, can we play a game?"

John lifted her up to his lap and smiled softly. "Sure, what do you want to play?"

He could think about her future when it happened. Right now they could just play a game.

Sorry if formatting is a little off, I'm updating from work and it's a windows computer and I'm used to a Mac. I'll edit it tonight if it looks too terrible.

27. Chapter 27

We've got a few Sarah Palmer chapters coming up! Woot woo! I know this will make some of you sad but I hope that you enjoy it because I think she's great. Let it be known, I'm pretty sure Fred and Kelly are the only military romance to occur without alcohol ever...lolll. I'm exaggerating but only slightly. Try and look at those flirty panels in escalation and Spartan Ops and tell me this isn't going through their heads! Lol! Enjoy y'all. I'll probably edit and change some formatting a little later because I'm posting from work on a windows computer and don't really know how to get it how I want. I'm going to respond to reviews later tonight, promise!

****EDIT:** Oh Mac, how I love thee. I'm not updating from work ever again, that first update was more of a hotmess than I thought it was format wise. Like I said, hope you guys enjoy the chapter, I'll respond to reviews from last chapter and this chapter tonight! ******

* * *

><p>Sarah woke up early that Friday. She looked over at Tom, who was currently sprawled out all over the bed. The man could definitely sleep when he was allowed to, she hadn't slept like that in years. She moved as quietly as she could to go get dressed, trying her best not to disturb him.<p>

After she had dressed she went to the bathroom quietly to fix her hair. She looked at herself in the mirror. She took the spray bottle and wet down her hair and brushed it back into the short ponytail she'd had for the past few years-it wasn't quite enough to put in a bun.

There was something ritualistic about doing her hair for work. She felt that it was something that marked her as distinctly female in the military-men just went to the barber shop. Sure they had their preferences about how closely they wanted to follow the regulations or if they wanted their hair as long as they could get away with-like Tom did, but it was really just a get up and go kind of look.

Females were allowed long hair as long as it did not exceed three inches in bulk, or it could be worn down if it sat above the collar. Either way, unless you got a buzz like a male-which many women favored, you would spend time each morning tucking away hair and taming flyaways.

In the field, it was obviously not something she thought about, just like how males didn't bother shaving when there were more important matters to attend to, but as a Spartan and Commander she knew it was important that she always look her best. She had noticed that in peacetime there was more emphasis on things she had once considered

more arbitrary. She supposed that when you weren't constantly worrying about your imminent death it was easier to worry about uniform regulation.

The war hadn't aged her very much. Her hair hadn't prematurely grayed, she didn't look gaunt or terribly wearied. She looked very much her forty years.

Tom had started to gray at his temples and the creases in his brow showed the worry his command had brought him. The Infinity was a big deal, he had proven himself with that command, it's what had cut him orders to Earth.

On Friday she was allowed to wear a Squadron shirt underneath her combat uniform to boost morale so she wore a shirt with the emblem of her first command. It made her smile. It was hard but it was a good memory. It brought her back to her time on the Infinity.

The Covenant Storm was on the run. All intel had started to indicate that the conflict would soon end and because of that, the Infinity docked for the first time in almost a year. The entire crew was allowed shore leave rotating in shifts.

She had mandated days of alcohol awareness training and assured her Spartans that if there were any alcohol related incidents the whole squadron would be sorry.

"And try to limit your 'community outreach' if you know what I'm saying. No one wants a present that makes it burn when you pee, ask Panzer," she advised receiving a few genuine laughs.

She gave the leave based on the fireteams so that they would be able to drink together for morale's sake.

After a week of this, she had no alcohol related incidents and sighed a sigh of relief. She knew Spartans were disciplined but she also knew that a good chunk of them were former ODSTs and Marines, and she remembered, or rather didn't remember, what it was like when she was an ODST. With her people all squared away, she decided that she was going to go on shore and have an evening all to herself.

She had dressed in civilian clothes for the first time in almost a year-a t-shirt and jeans. It was all she had that fit her, she had only bought a few outfits after her surgeries. She had reflexively went to tie her hair back but paused, deciding to leave it down.

She went to the exit checkpoint during the middle of dinner to avoid anyone seeing her. She had already made a hotel reservation and was looking forward to getting drunk at dinner, walking up to her room, taking a bath and binge watching movies with a bottle of wine. After living in such close quarters for so long, the idea of being alone and indulging a little sounded like bliss.

"Are you taking your leave?"

She turned and saw the Captain, dressed in civvies.

"You should've gotten the paperwork at the end of the duty day," she said snarkily.

"I probably didn't read it while I approved it, I told Roland to just approve all Spartan leave, I figured you would have a good schedule devised."

She smiled softly. She loved how he did that. He never breathed down her neck, he treated her like an equal even though it was his ship. Unless orders came down directly from the Navy, she was allowed her fair say in every matter. He knew that was the best way for her to take care of her people and she appreciated his distance.

They left the ship and she saw Tom sigh at the setting sunlight.

"What do you have planned for your evening away?" he asked.

"Dinner and a movie," she said.

"Sounds like a date," he teased. She smirked.

"A date with myself," she said, calling a cab to the hotel.

"Do you want any company?"

She felt her heartbeat quicken slightly. A minute ago she had been fantasizing about going off by herself, but something about him was just so charming. She couldn't handle how genuine he always seemed, it made her a little uncomfortable when almost everyone seemed like they put up a front.

"Why not?" she had found herself saying.

The restaurant in the hotel was really good. She ordered as much food as she wanted with absolutely no reservation-she was going to carry on with her evening the way she had planned.

She was surprised at how much he made her feel like talking. She wasn't a particularly chatty person but Tom always had something interesting or funny to say. He was also exceedingly fun to tease. After they ate dinner, she sighed.

"Well, you can judge me if you want, but I'm planning on going to the bar, I need a drink. Or ten," she said running a hand through her hair.

"I was actually thinking the same thing," he said.

"You think you can keep up with me?"

"Oh I know you could probably drink me under the table, on my first tour I lost a bet and had to go out with ODSTs, I don't remember most of the evening, but I'll do my best," they sat down at the bar and he ordered the both of them a drink.

The evening continued on in that manner, each of them buying every other round until Sarah felt like her head was starting to spin and felt her face get warm. She was also laughing more than she had in a long time.

"I see why you were going out alone tonight, if you talked too long with someone they'd learn that you're the biggest nerd in the world,"

she teased.

He laughed, "Don't tell anyone, the whole intimidation thing I have going on will be ruined."

She smiled earnestly. He was a great leader, he didn't intimidate or demand respect, he earned it by being competent and working hard. He was great.

"Thanks," he said bashfully.

She flushed. "I didn't realize I had said that aloud," she gestured for another round.

"Oh God," he said glancing warily at the glasses of liquor-Sarah preferred liquor later into the night, start out easy with wine then stop pretending you care about taste.

"Couple more," she pressured.

"This is why we don't give leave like this often you guys go out and get destroyed," he laughed.

"Please, this isn't even three clicks from destroyed," she ran her finger over the glass rim.

"What should this one be to?"

"How about to our date?"

She felt her cheeks get warm.

"Oh so now it's our date? This was my date with myself and then you barged in," she quipped.

"Well then to you for letting me tag along," he winked and she felt like she was sixteen again, her heart beating quickly and her cheeks flushing red. She smiled at him reluctantly and tipped her glass to him, knocking back the shot.

The liquor on this planet was hot. Maybe her tolerance was just gone after so long but she just felt so good. She didn't feel drunk as much as she felt relaxed. Perhaps that came with age. Last time she had really drank had been before she became a Spartan when she had lead a successful campaign against Covenant forces and that had been a special evening. This was different, this was a relaxed, take the edge off of life kind of feeling.

She shook her head and knew she was in trouble. With her inhibitions worn down, she started to think things she would have never let herself think in an entirely sober mindset.

I like his smile. I like his laugh. I like his hands. He's cute. He's nice. I bet he would be nice to me.

"Can I confess something?"

She smiled wryly. "What, do you do something embarrassing like sleep with a baby blanket?"

He chuckled, "Something other than that."

"Shoot," she said.

"I knew you were taking leave this evening. In fact, I took my leave hoping I'd run into you."

She looked at him and she was amazed to see that the nerdy, awkward guy she felt used to was not the man looking at her right now. It was somehow exhilarating.

"Don't you get enough of me at work?"

"No," he said lowly. He reached over and traced his thumb over her cheek. He tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear and let his hand linger before pulling it away. She was embarrassed at her reaction and held back a sigh. She hadn't been treated so gently in recent memory.

He pulled his hand away and she saw him shift awkwardly but then he seemed resolved. He passed something over to her, he got up and left.

She looked down. It was a napkin from the bar. On it he had written something. A number.

A room number.

She could hear her heart beating in her head.

This was just like him. Nothing they had said up to this point had been anything that couldn't be swept under the rug, be completely credited as co-workers out having a good time. Sure, they had flirted a bit but that wasn't too out of the ordinary for the two of them. Everything had been safe. There was absolutely no pressure on her end, but a very clear invitation on his. She was impressed by the amount of tact he had managed to apply.

Now she had a choice to make.

She could do what she knew was the safe choice. She could go up to her room, take that bath and watch reruns on television, polish off a bottle of wine and sleep until noon. She would go back to the Infinity and very, very easily act as if this evening had been nothing out of the ordinary.

She walked up to her room and threw her bag on the bed. She went into the bathroom and splashed some water on her face, trying to calm herself. She ran a hand through her hair and sighed. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was tousled and her face still slightly flushed.

You're a coward.

"Fuck," she cursed. She felt so conflicted. How could she be so chicken? She knew she wanted this. Was a random hook-up with the commanding officer of the largest ship in the Navy a good idea? It _was_ a random hook-up, right?

"I am too fucking drunk for this bullshit," she sighed putting her

hand on her forehead and rubbing her temples.

And there it was. She leaned on the bathroom counter and looked at herself in the mirror.

"Sarah Palmer," she addressed herself drunkenly. "You are drunk off your ass for the first time in almost two years. You," she pointed at the mirror, "are going to march your fine ass up to that room and give that nerdy but strangely sexy Captain a night he won't soon forget, and you can freak out about it tomorrow when you are sober enough to give a flying fuck."

That seemed perfectly reasonable.

She got to the door of his room. She knew she was strong enough that should could break it down if she wanted to, tear it clean off of its hinges, but that would be exactly the type of alcohol related incident she had briefed her Spartans on preventing.

She knocked twice. She heard some rustling and Tom opened the door. He had already changed into his pajamas and cleaned up for bed. She hadn't realized how long her little revelation had taken.

She stepped into the room and registered the door closing behind her. She looked at him. He looked at her. She could feel the tension between the two of them.

"Sarah, I-"

She put a finger to his mouth, effectively silencing him.

"Don't speak, I don't want you to say anything that makes too much sense."

She pushed him roughly against the wall and kissed him.

God it had felt better than she thought it would. She hadn't realized how much she had wanted this very scenario-everything had been so fleeting and she didn't usually catch herself in any sort of fantasy, it wasn't in her nature. But it didn't matter because there was no way a fantasy would live up to the way she felt in this moment.

She felt him pull at her hair more roughly than she would've ever expected from him, he pulled away from her and started kissing her neck and she moaned without even having enough inhibition to be embarrassed.

The lights in the room were dim, almost to the point of being pointless. In a flurry of clothes and gasps she found herself pinned beneath him, a scenario she would have never imagined. She could've easily overpowered him but she didn't really want to. He was gentle yet persistent in his ministrations. He touched her with something akin to reverence, the way he slowly traced his hands and mouth over her body made her shiver.

She had been right. He was nice to her. Very nice to her. Nicest anyone had ever been to her, really.

All the other men she had slept with were different, she never really

pegged herself as someone with a specific type. Sexy came in all shapes and sizes and she knew she could be an intimidating woman, any man that had the guts to hit on her usually got points in her books. She had hooked up with mostly other ODSs because that's what she had been around most often, that had been when she went through her more experimental phase and she hadn't cared much about sleeping around a bit. When you thought you might die in a moment it seemed a little silly to worry about something so fleeting as sex. That's what it had all been, fleeting.

This was entirely different. She felt like she had sobered up a fair amount but was somehow high on something else completely, while still entirely present in the moment. He was slow and affectionate while somehow still intense.

She felt his breath on her neck and wrapped herself around him. If she could she would disappear, she would take as much of him as she could until she didn't know who she was anymore.

She heard him whisper her name with desperation she had never heard applied to her or her name.

They were both breathing hard when it was over. She was still a little buzzed but almost sober and somehow reality hadn't quite hit her yet-she was still caught up in this moment. He ran a hand through her hair.

"You are beautiful," he said softly.

So honest. So genuine. She wanted to respond with something caustic and sarcastic but came up blank. Instead she just wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his chest.

She breathed in deeply.

"You should know that when we wake up I'm going to freak out about this," she said softly.

She closed her eyes and went to sleep.

* * *

><p>Okay, hopefully the formatting is a little less jacked up. I hope you guys enjoyed this, this is one of my fav things to write, I just thought it was so damn fun and I got really into the characters. I missed writing in a more military environment.<p>

So I got my marriage license today which was cool and my new job is going really well so I'm really happy with that. Been a busy month but I've been writing a reasonable amount. I have lots of future scenes planned out, I just have to write the things that connect them to where this story is right now...lol! Like I said, hope you guys enjoyed, thanks to all of you that review, especially my anon reviewers I can't respond to, you're awesome too!

28. Chapter 28

Ugh I have pinkeye. Stayed home from work today and slept for like a hundred years. This chapter is a BIG milestone for me because it

marks the end of my first google doc that I started this story on, all 290 pages of it. _ It's a little unsettling because I think I'm a mere 30,000 words ahead of what I'm posting right now (oh snap)...

Life has been busy, hope you're all well and enjoy this chapter.
:)

****EDIT: formatting hates me and mysteriously makes my line break button disappear when it feels like it.****

* * *

><p>Sarah grabbed her things and got in her car for work. It was meetings all morning then early dismissal. Then they were apparently babysitting for John and Cortana.<p>

Honestly it would feel almost like a date-that apartment Cortana's job had her put up in was really something else.

She had been true to her word. She had proceeded to freak out and leave the next morning, vowing she would try and forget about the entire incident.

After a month had passed, she quickly realized that was impossible.

It was late at night and she _could not _sleep. Her mind was busy with the day. Training exercises, operational readiness, Covenant Storm, New Phoenix, Master Chief's fucking retirement and all the paperwork that _that _fucking entailed. Though he had been out for almost two years at this point, he was technically her's because she was his last commander before he went AWOL. She also had to retroactively review his psych eval that had put him on med hold because the system wouldn't let her request him a normal retirement without doing so, which was a huge waste of her time and a pain in the ass. It also was _not _easy to retire Spartans, she was quickly realizing. There was so much compensation and benefits that went into it that all needed to be filed perfectly or it was rejected from the next level of approval. On the bright side, his retirement would be the hardest one she would ever fill out. It was like she had to fill out an after action report on his _entire life_ and it was leaving her with a lot _more_ very exciting paperwork. She had interviews for a command position on Earth, armor maintenance, Laskyâ€|.

She groaned at the thought. Fucking Lasky. Lasky and his stupid smile, his stupid way of keeping everything normal between them after the best sex she'd ever had, his stupid hands on her body, his stupid _mouth_...Okay even she couldn't say his mouth was stupid, it had been pretty brilliant.

"Ugh, fuck," she sighed. She hadn't felt this ridiculous over a guy since she was a teenager and what a cosmic joke that it was _Tom Lasky_, the biggest square she had ever known had her up at night all hot and bothered. Who would have known? She supposed she should have known, he was so fucking _nice_, _of course he would be _nice _in bed. She felt her body react just from the _memory _of how _nice _he had been, how it would be if he was just _here_, in her bed reminding her.

Even if she could swallow her shame and make it to his cabin, the ship systems would catch it on camera which was the _last _thing she really wanted. Unlessâ€¦|

She glanced over at her bedside table drawer. In it she had a really nice active camouflage she'd swiped off of an Elite. If she timed it right, the shipboard systems would hardly notice her opening and closing their doors, just a blip on the radar that even when scrutinized wouldn't seem like much of anythingâ€¦|

She took out her datapad. It was a challenge that she couldn't pass up and she wasn't sleeping anyways.

_Open your door in approximately ten minutes. _

She would wait for his response.

_Is something wrong? _

She sighed. _Aside from the fact that I can't sleep because I'm thinking about fucking you senseless, no, _she thought to herself irritably.

_Just do what I ask please. _

She could see that he was writing his response.

Okay.

Entirely too short for how long he had taken to respond but she didn't care. She pulled on a tank top and a pair of thin socks to hopefully dampen any sound her bare feet would make. She grabbed the active camouflage-she could not _believe _what she was using this for. She was sure there were a disgusting amount of regulations she was breaking in using Covenant tech without the proper orders but she was currently sneaking to the Captain's quarters in the dead of night for the express purpose of sleeping with him so she supposed rules were a little superfluous at this point.

The journey to Lasky's cabin was simple and she hadn't encountered anyone aside from a pair of E-3s on patrol who were gossiping about this and that.

_Oh the gossip that would spread if anyone knew what I was doing right now, _she thought to herself. Somehow the thought was almost exciting for her.

She had arrived outside of the Captain's Cabin. She checked her watch but realized that she couldn't see it because of the active camo. Wow, she was really distracted.

I wonder why, she thought sarcastically.

She waited another minute-she didn't want to risk knocking. She must have walked more quickly than she thought.

Right as she was sure he had fallen back asleep, the door opened and she walked in.

He surprisedly stepped back and jumped a little when she deactivated

the active camouflage.

"To what do I owe the," she watched his eyes track from her ankles, up her legs, linger slightly at short sleep shorts and breasts until he looked at her face, "pleasure?" he said, a little strained.

She dropped the active camo, letting it fall to the floor with a clunk. She crossed her arms and looked around his cabin.

"Nice place you got here, wood floors, damn," she commented.

She saw him shift his weight awkwardly, "Yeah, I think that's because Infinity was commissioned for research, implications are a little less austere."

He paused and looked at her. She was frowning.

"Is there...something you wanted to talk about?"

She frowned even more and he found himself a little afraid of her.

"Yeah, actually, I'm pretty pissed off," in one stride she was face to face with him, her eyes intense with something akin to anger and frustration, "I'm pissed off about the shit storm I'm dealing with-the third operational readiness inspection this cycle, the paperwork retirement for the most decorated hero in the UNSC, upcoming interviews for a commanding position I _really _want, I have a lot on my plate. But that's not what's keeping me up, do you have a guess about what's keeping me up?"

He shook his head slightly.

"_You _and your stupid smile and your stupid face and everything about you is making it so I can't sleep tonight. For the past _month _I have _tried _to forget about what happened but every night I sit up thinking about how the _nerdiest, lamest, _nicest, Captain in the UNSC makes my fucking _toes curl_," she paused and tried to calm herself.

He smirked, "I didn't realize I had had such an effect on you," he teased softly.

This made her angrier.

"The funny thing is I think you _do_, I think you've liked seeing me uncomfortable for the past month."

He put a hand on her waist and pulled her flush against him. Just his hand on her made her heart beat faster and her breathing feel more shallow.

"It _does _give me a little satisfaction to know I'm not so entirely forgettable, but it should satisfy you to know that you're on my mind just as often," he said lowly.

It was fast and explosive, she had never found herself so far gone so quickly. Maybe it had been the anticipation or just the very erotic nature of the entire situation but before long she was pulling at his hair and begging him to just _finish _everything. She'd never begged

for anything, but her pride in the entire matter was completely gone.

She felt just as confused as she had before when she was laying naked on his bed. She pulled a blanket over and covered herself.

"Shit," she sighed, running a hand through her hair.

He turned on his side and looked at her, obviously confused.

"I was hoping that this would make it easier."

"You slept with me again because you thought it would _simplify _things?"

"When you say it _that _way of course it sounds stupid. I think I was hoping the first time was a fluke or something, maybe if I just got it out of my system...I don't know." She felt stupid. She had wanted her feelings to just go away, that maybe it was a physical urge she could satisfy, an impulse, a silly passing fancy. She realized now that this wasn't at all the case.

It was him. She had wanted him.

"What do you feel now then?"

She sighed.

"I don't know what the right thing to do is anymore."

They were both quiet.

He stood up and put on his shorts, then he sat on the edge of the bed, facing away from her.

"You should know that I think you're amazing. I think you're smart, strong, funny, brave, and beautiful. I don't just want to sleep with you, I _like _you. If I had the chance I'd treat you well, I'd be happy to do anything for you," his words were so sincere, so simple and yet so, so complicated for her. She had never heard anyone speak so highly of her. She knew he understood her, she knew he wanted _her. _It was scary to feel like someone saw you the way she knew he saw her.

She frowned and put on her shorts. She stood up and walked in front of him, not really caring that she was topless.

"You're oversimplifying. If it were that easy I'd be here every night. As your _friend _I have lied and broken so many rules for you, if I was your lover I don't even want to think about the things I'd do." She pulled her shirt over her head. "I am a Spartan before I am a woman. I have inherited the burdens of my predecessors. Hundreds of Spartans and all of the UNSC look to _me _as an example. I can't just do what I want, no matter how much I might want to be with you."

He was starting to get angry. "But you just said you want to be with me, how can you live your life like this?"

How was he not understanding this? He may not be a Spartan but his life was also dictated by duty, defined by service.

"Tom, my life isn't my own," she picked up the active camouflage and turned to leave.

"Damn I seriously thought it was just him but I'm slowly realizing all of you Spartans are insane," he ran a hand through his hair.

"Who are you talking about?" she turned to him, her hand resting on her hip.

"I talked to the Chief on the bridge after the New Phoenix event."

She thought about the last she had seen of the Master Chief. For all the legend that he was, underneath all of that armor he had been a broken, sad man. His leadership had brought him that burden, the leader of the Spartan-IIs. She had wondered if they would share a similar fate, if in ten years she would look that way. She had wondered how many people one can lose, how many loved ones lost were too many. Apparently he had reached his own personal limit then.

"You Spartans all have this glorious way of talking about humanity, you go on and on about how you have to defend it without allowing yourself to experience it. You're a Spartan and I'm a Captain, but when it comes down to it we're all just people, it's as simple as that, we can't be anything else, it doesn't work that way. You can't take it away, underneath all that armor and muscle you guys are the same as the rest of us, even if you don't want to admit it."

She frowned. "And we see where that got the Chief, his psych write up is sitting on my desk so I can get his mandatory retirement processed, the minute he let that get to him he's unfit for duty and going AWOL on some expedition to find or mourn the AI construct he fell in love with," saying it out loud that way sounded absolutely ridiculous, probably because it was. She hadn't believed it when he had just checked out after his psych eval had declared him too unstable for a return to duty, he had just up and left to find what he needed to find.

"You can wake up and realize that, realize that there is more and you lose it, you lose control and crumble. You can't survive thinking that way Tom. The Chief paid his dues, he paid his dues for over thirty years and he can afford to lose his shit because there are people like me who fall in line afterwards. And that's why I can't do what you're asking, I have to fall in line."

She looked at him, seeing the sadness on his face made her feel sick. She felt sick about the entire situation. She wanted to mean her words, she wanted to believe them with every fiber of her being

She turned again to leave.

"I never thought you were someone to take the easy way out."

She hesitated.

"Just what about this about this situation seems easy for me, I'd like to know so I can think about it later," she said lowly. How

could he do that, be so goddamn irritating.

He stood up and put his hand on her shoulder. She turned around and met his eyes.

"It's easier to run away from your thoughts and feelings than confront them. It's easier to bury everything in work than let something get to you. I know if we don't give this a chance I'll regret it for the rest of my life and so will you," he ran his hand down from her shoulder and held her hand in his own.

She squeezed his hand and closed her eyes for a beat.

"You're just too good for this world Tom," she kissed him softly on the cheek, letting her lips linger for a little longer, "But this isn't a fairy tale. I'll see you tomorrow, Captain."

Another week gone and she had avoided him at all costs staying in 'Spartan-land' as much as possible. When she was around him, all of her interactions were to the point and concise, as professional as she could be.

It was killing her.

Beyond the physical want, she missed their banter, the casual way she could talk to him. She had ruined everything and it made her feel horrible. It was worse than Sarah had imagined it would be.

All of the Spartans were lined up in the hangar, along with the rest of the Infinity's crew for the mandatory Commander's call.

She sighed, trying not to fidget in her bio suit. Her Spartans were pretty quiet, lacking a lot of the casual chatter that went with large groups of people. Perhaps they were as excited for this as she was. She looked at the hangar bay doors, waiting for Lasky to walk in-one of the Chiefs would call the ship to attention when he walked in.

He walked on deck.

"Officer on-deck!"

Her Spartans _snapped _to attention, their rows perfectly filed and equidistant-the rest of the Infinity was slightly slower on the uptake.

"Carry on," he waved.

Only he would be able to seem _embarrassed _for the respect he was due.

"Good morning, Infinity," he greeted.

Of course you're a motherfucking ray of sunshine, Palmer thought to herself. He started to brief on the operations for the week, he handed out awards for crewmember of the quarter, recognized a few promotions, welcomed some new crew, talked about areas that were doing well-overall, he was very encouraging, optimistic and positive. Everything Palmer wasn't feeling. She felt like she had taken her own heart out of her chest and stomped all over it. Everything hurt and

she felt sick despite the tough facade she had so carefully crafted.

"Commander Palmer, anything for Infinity from the Spartan side?"

He _smiled _at her. It made her stomach turn. She felt both delighted and angry. He was so much better than her, he could just treat her the same like it wasn't hurting. Maybe it wasn't hurting him the way it was hurting her. She cleared her throat and put on the best _oo-rah _face she could muster.

"Spartans will be entering another operational readiness exercise," _because fucking ONI hates me and I fucking hate them and fuck fuck fuck, _"And we appreciate your continued support operations," Spartans couldn't run by themselves-all of their support staff was Navy, it would be silly to have Spartans doing anything besides being Spartans.

"We understand the demands that a state-of-the-art vessel like Infinity present and acknowledge that your support is the only thing helping us succeed in these exercises. Infinity is the finest crew I've ever seen and I know you will continue to meet that standard of excellence. In the meantime, Spartan operations will resume with 14-hour shifts effective at 0600 in two days time. For Infinity crew not involved in the exercise, please be as discreet as possible-when we mobilize onto the planet surface it shouldn't affect daily operations for the rest of the exercise but the initial mobilization phase will affect real-world operations."

I'm sitting here telling the crew of Infinity that a pretend scenario made up by ONI is going to disrupt their entire workflow for twenty-four hours, they must hate me, hard to follow a ray of sunshine. Good cop bad cop thing I suppose.

After a few words from Lasky the Infinity was dismissed. Palmer had briefings for the rest of the morning on the Spartan side.

She spent the entire morning in briefings. She had a quick lunch and went back to her office to start her paperwork.

If I had known being a commander was this much paperwork I would've never commissioned. I need to shoot something, she thought to herself irritably.

After a few hours she went to look at the crown jewel of her day-the retirement of Master Chief Petty Officer John-117.

She cursed under her breath when the automated form wouldn't let her proceed without giving him a last name.

"Fucker doesn't have a last name," she hit the _next _button a few more times childishly. "Fine, 117 is a last name," she said, losing any shred of patience...and the form wouldn't accept numbers in the name field.

"I am done with this today," she said quickly after thirty more minutes of trying to deal with it.

When she had finally figured that out, she looked at the entire list of things she had to fill out on the man

How would you describe the character of the retiring individual?

She groaned, "Fucking _actually_?"

"Something have you upset Commander?"

He was walking into her office, she wasn't standing up like custom dictated, she was too frustrated with everything.

"I had my interview for Earth today which I think I bombed and I'm doing retirement paperwork. Do I look happy?" she complained. _And you're here which is making me both irritated, sick, and excited. Keeping things simple. _

"I'm sure you did fine on your interview and I think I can fix your paperwork problem," he said lightly. He walked smoothly up to her desk and held a data chip. She looked at it.

"What's in that?"

"I'll give it to you if you get dinner with me."

She frowned.

"Tom," she said warily.

"We get dinner, we're friends," he said lowly.

His tone didn't say friends. His tone said I'm thinking of you naked and it irritated her because she was trying not to think thoughts like that.

"I don't think it's a good idea for where I am right now," she said typing something completely bullshit about the Chief's character.

"Well, I think that form isn't good for where you are right now and _I _have filled out more retirement paperwork than you could imagine-in the Navy that's the XO's job," he said tossing the chip between his hands.

She would've killed for a first officer to do her bitch work, something the Spartan branch desperately needed. She had a great first shirt but shirts were enlisted. No, she really could've used an extra administrative officer.

He tapped the chip on her desk and the paperwork she had been staring at for forty minutes disappeared, replaced with pages and pages of neatly filed, accurately processed retirement papers for John-117. Her eyes widened.

"How did you get past the first page without making up some bullshit last name?"

"Spartan-II surnames are classified, just redact the information."

"Clever," she said.

"Yours, if you go to chow with me," he said smiling.

She leaned back in her chair and sighed.

"You sure know how to woo a girl, don't you Tom?"

"You don't seem like a girl who wants flowers," he teased. She took the chip and filed the paperwork for herself. She stood up. She stood taller than him but she didn't feel taller in this situation.

"You'd be correct in that regard," she looked at him and remembered how much she had missed talking to him, even in just a week. Her severe expression softened.

"I can get dinner with your ugly mug," she sighed.

They walked to the galley together and she couldn't help but just feel better. It was the end of the dinner shift and most people had went to go do whatever filled their free time on this ship. She thought there was a gravball tournament tonight. whatever reason, they were mostly alone save a few other soldiers.

"Are you dropping on Thursday?"

"Yeah, my recertification is due. We're making the Spartans who weren't ODSTs drop this time around even if their certification isn't up, it's a good training opportunity and I feel like as the leader I should probably take the drop with them."

"Do you guys have to drop in your indoc?"

"Oh yeah, a drop in MJOLNIR is one of the first things you do after the surgeries. Gives you confidence. I think for the ones that haven't done a drop it's still terrifying but if you were an ODST and you're doing what seems like your thousandth orbital drop in all that gear and after all that surgery-you feel like a rock star. Probably the highlight of the indoc phase," she took a bite of an apple.

"In flight school we don't do an orbital drop but we do some more regular ones. Made me glad I didn't become an ODST."

"Was it something you ever considered?"

He shook his head. "Not after my brother died, it was too hard. No, I knew I wanted to do this after Corbulo."

"Your brother was an ODST?" She didn't bother asking how he had died. Often with ODSTs death was a matter of when, not if.

"Yeah, helljumper tattoo and everything."

"I never felt inclined to get one though I'm surprised I didn't."

"I noticed," he said.

She felt herself turn red-she hated being as fair as she was, it was so easy to tell when she was embarrassed.

"You don't have any embarrassing tattoos? I'm surprised you don't

have a pretty flower or something. I nearly convinced a guy to get 'death before dishonor' tattooed across his chest but the tattoo place turned us away because we were too drunk, probably one of the most decent civilians I've ever met," she quipped trying to deflect his very clear memory of her without clothes.

"You should listen to your own alcohol briefings," he joked.

"Well, a younger Sarah was a little bit more wild when she could afford it, when we were given shore leave we did it right, if you didn't wake up handcuffed to a bedpost next to a stranger with an eyebrow shaved off and a new tattoo you weren't drinking enough."

"I can only imagine, I was still a nerd, but you could have probably guessed that."

"Not the worst thing to be, I'm surprised I survived my ODST days, becoming a Spartan might have been a safer career move than I had thought."

Lucy watched from afar as her Commander laughed at something the Captain had said.

How quickly she has become your Commander, Lucy thought to herself.

It was true, she'd follow that woman. There was something about her that was very raw and very inspiring-she'd die on her orders if she had to. It was her duty as a Spartan and she could do that duty happily if the time came.

Lucy shook her head from the rather morbid thoughts-it was hard to remember that wartime operations had slowed significantly. She took a note to remember that. It helped her, to remind herself that she needn't be so hyper-aware, that she could be calm in isolated moments whenever the mission allowed for it.

Something had been off with the Commander for the past month or so. She couldn't place exactly what it was but when you were as quiet as she was you started to notice things about people, especially the things they didn't say.

When she had been new to Infinity, she noticed right away that the Captain and the Commander were close. Not only had they been close, they were casual. Their body language was always very at ease, very open.

They were both officers so it wasn't as if it was inappropriate, it was just worth noting. The Captain smiled and made eye contact with people, it made her feel uncomfortable because he had so much rank.

After Commander Palmer came back from her shore leave, Lucy noticed that the Commander and the Captain stopped talking as often. He didn't come into their office suite as frequently and when he did it was usually strictly business. Lucy tried to ignore the suddenly tense relationship-whatever it was, it was probably above her pay-grade.

Now the Commander was back to talking and laughing with him.

Interesting.

She was sitting in the dining hall alone at the end of the dinner shift. She had many small patches of the day that she had blocked off as 'alone time'. It was very important that she had publicly known patches of alone time so people could approach her privately. It had been difficult at first because she wasn't used to going anywhere alone-she hadn't been alone since she was a child really, but she had started to kind of enjoy the time to reflect. It was also gratifying when her fellow Spartans would approach her with their problems. The war had made survivors out of all of them.

The Commander made eye contact with her from across the room. She couldn't tell if she had just been noticed or if just now acknowledged. She gestured to her to come over.

Maybe I shouldn't have been lingering here, thought Lucy nervously.

"Good evening ma'am," she said approaching the table trying not to be on edge. The Commander was nice and not overly formal.

"You ready to drop tomorrow, Spartan?"

"Yes ma'am," she replied.

"Have you ever done an orbital drop? I think it's a good experience."

"No I haven't ever done one that high up."

"Well it's okay to feel a little nervous, you'll be fine."

"Dropping doesn't scare me, I actually like it, I did my first jump when I was five years old," she replied. She watched their faces quickly shift from casual to blank, shocked, and slightly awkward.

Oh, everyone here wasn't a child soldier? I forget that sometimes, she thought to herself sarcastically. It was easy to feel alienated. The other Spartans were surely dedicated but they didn't have the same understanding and rapport that she had felt with the Spartan-IIs. She felt awkward about the silence.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," she said quietly.

"No, Lucy don't apologise, _I _apologise for making you worry," the Commander looked steelier than she had a few moments ago. She straightened her collar and looked at the Captain with a little unnecessary coldness that Lucy couldn't help but feel was a foreign coming from her. "I'll be taking my leave, Captain, Spartan," she acknowledged both of them and stood up, towering over a foot over Lucy.

She watched the Captain leave after he said goodbye to her kindly. She had never seen someone look so sad and wistful in a moment. She felt uncomfortable seeing something that seemed so personal. Lucy couldn't help but think that something was most certainly amiss.

Sarah changed into PT gear and went to run, breaking out into a quick pace that she wouldn't be able to maintain for much over an hour, enough for her to really feel the exertion she was longing for.

_What a joke, I'm laughing up a storm with the Captain about my belligerent days as an ODS and my shirt was dropping out of the sky as a little girl along with a handful of my Spartans who are bonafide child soldier war heroes. Perspective. Get it together Sarah. Fall in line. _

Her entire existence as a Spartan was defined by the fact that no matter what she gave; her life, her mind, her body, her soul, it would never live up to the men and women before her. She had a mother and a father. She had a last name. She had had choices and answers.

_But the Captain. The sweet, goofy Captain. _

Tom.

He still made her stomach flutter and it enraged her. She wanted him so badly. Too badly.

She let the hour melt away and grabbed a towel angrily to wipe the sweat off of her face.

"Jesus, Commander's got something on her mind," she heard a Spartan murmur. She glared sharply in their direction, watching the group stiffen and glance away awkwardly.

_And now I look like a basket case to my troops, fan-fucking-tastic, she thought. _I need a shower. _

Sarah smiled as she pulled into her parking spot.

_Best part of being stationed on a home world, I get a parking spot with my name on it, that feels good, she thought to herself smugly. It felt childish to care about things like that but she didn't really care.

Briefings went by quickly and she watched the sun rise. She felt like she was on auto-pilot most of the day, it was only a half day and very relaxed. She was meeting Tom at the train station and didn't have time to change if they were going to make the same train. She felt a little discombobulated and hurried as she gathered her things.

I guess I'm playing babysitter tonight. That'll be interesting.

* * *

><p>I really like writing Sarah Palmer. Hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, it's a good one in my opinion, thought you guys deserved something longer because updates have been so sporadic. Thanks again to everyone who reviews or sends encouragement, it really means the world.<p>

29. Chapter 29

How are you guys? Sorry it's been a hundred years. Been busy with things. Also who else has been playing Halo like, nonstop since tuesday? My husband and I got each other an early christmas gift with an xbox one and MC collection...it is bliss, Halo 2 is beautiful, I have so many feels.

Giving you guys a fluffy romance chapter. This chapter was SO hard for me, and normally this story is really easy to me but I don't think it shows too badly. I have SO much written in the future of this story but bridging the material between what I've already published and that stuff is challenging. I hope you guys enjoy.

* * *

><p>Sarah found herself once again feeling a little uncomfortable with how high end the apartment was. The elevator was entirely glass and gave a panoramic view of the sprawling marvel that was New York City.<p>

She grew up on Luna so skyscrapers and flashing lights weren't really a feature. Luna was modest with simple infrastructure. She had run away around fifteen to join the UNSC, but Luna was still home in many ways.

They arrived on the fiftieth floor and Tom rang the doorbell.

The Master Chief, or rather John, answered the door. He looked rather frazzled. He was half dressed in attire more formal than she'd ever seen him wear since he was usually a t-shirt kind of guy.

They heard crying.

_Oh fuck. _

"Joan what's _wrong?_", Sarah heard Cortana begging in the next room. The wails just got louder.

Sarah watched John fumble with a tie until he very clearly decided he wasn't going to bother and threw it on the dining room table.

"Make yourselves comfortable," he said distractedly walking to the next room where his ailing toddler was.

"What the hell did you get us into Tom?," she whispered irritably.

"Look those two have saved the human race a few times over and we are officers in the United Nations Space Command, I think we can handle a three year old," he said determinedly.

"I don't know what you were taught in officer school but I am thoroughly unequipped for this kind of thing."

Sarah eavesdropped on the conversation happening in the room over.

"We can't leave her with them like this," said John over his daughter's cries.

"No. Out of the question, I have been fantasizing about these evening for _weeks_, Joan is too dependant on you sheâ€œ"

"She is _not _too dependant on me, she is _three _and I am her _father_, " she heard John growl.

Oh shit, they're going to get into a fight.

"This is really awkward," she said quietly to Tom.

"I'm sure they'll work it out," he said a little unconvincingly.

"John I _know _that but I am your _wife _and we haven't had sex where I felt anything but exhausted or you weren't covered in some sort of bodily fluid for _three years _so we are leaving Joan with the Captain and that is _final!_, " Cortana screeched over her daughter's wails.

Sarah wanted to die right then and there. She heard John groan.

"I _understand _Cortana, do you think I like this? I can't just explain to Joan that Mommy and Daddy are feeling _sexually frustrated _because Mommy has a new job that keeps her away all day."

"Dear God can we please record the Master Chief saying the phrase sexually frustrated and just loop it through the Spartan Bays? Jesus H Christ," sighed Sarah running a hand through her hair.

"Okay you're right, this is awkward," acquiesced Tom.

"Don't call me _Mommy _for Christ's sake, I have a name, it's Cortana!"

"I wasn't calling you Mommy Cortana I was talking about Joan."

"And I'm _sorry _my job keeps me busy, you're being a huge hypocrite if we want to talk about being a workaholic, you know I can't help it!," she yelled, ignoring him.

"I understand you need to do your job well, I'm just saying that there are a lot of factorsâ€œ"

"I don't care, I really don't care what the factors are I just want to get out of the house with you," her voice shook and tapered off.

They started speaking more hushed and Sarah swore that she heard Cortana crying.

"Cortana, let me try again," she heard John say.

"I give up, I'm a terrible mother."

"No, that's not true."

"I just can't do this, I can't deal with sharing you constantly. I just want _one evening_, if that makes me a selfish and terrible mother I can't change it," they heard her sob.

"I know, I'm sorry, we'll go out, I promise just let me take her for a few minutes. Go finish getting ready, we can make our reservation still," he said.

_I feel so uncomfortable right now. _

Sarah watched Cortana shuffle out of the room they had been arguing in, clearly trying to escape their notice so they didn't see her but it didn't work too well, she was visibly upset.

After about fifteen minutes of awkward silence, Joan seemed to have stopped crying. John came out with the three year old who was still pouting but looked a little more composed than the crying mess she surely had been a few minutes ago.

"See Joan, do you remember Sarah and Tom? You had so much fun with them last time they were here," he explained, he seemed like he was almost begging her which Sarah was sure thousands of parenting books said you weren't supposed to do but he seemed to be beyond caring about what was acceptable in bargaining with your three year old.

She nodded, eyeing them warily.

"Now, Mom and Dad want to spend some time together,"

"But why can't I _come_?," she said, starting to get upset again.

Sarah watched John's expression go to one of sheer terror. Clearly this was a conversation they had already had.

"Just _because _sweetheart, but I _promise _you'll have fun with Sarah and Tom, okay?," he said carefully. He was clearly beyond explaining himself.

"And I promise that we can go do something together this week," he bribed.

She nodded.

"Now, why don't you play a game with Tom and Sarah while I go talk with your mother," he coaxed.

The little girl sighed and nodded, finding their terms agreeable.

John set her down on the ground and quickly walked back to his bedroom without saying a word to either of them. He was very clearly stressed.

They simply stared at the little girl until her parents came out of their bedroom, clearly more composed though still a little discombobulated.

"Okay, I'm sorry about that, but it seems like we've got ourselves at something of an armistice," said Cortana sarcastically.

Sarah couldn't help but chuckle at her choice of words.

"I've written down everything you need to know, bedtimes, meal times, entertainment options and where they are. She knows the rules, she's going to behave, right?," said Cortana looking at her child expectantly.

Joan nodded a little sadly.

"When you have her in bed, please help yourselves to anything you want, I've turned down the guest bedroom and you're welcome to the jacuzzi tub in the master bath, seriously it's nice so have a good time," she winked.

Sarah laughed and Tom looked a little embarrassed which made Sarah laugh even harder.

"Okay Joan, time to say goodbye to Mom and Dad," Cortana said carefully.

Surprisingly, Cortana leaned down and kissed Joan swiftly and Joan smiled.

"Alright, I'll see you tomorrow sweetheart," said John, picking her up and kissing her on the cheek.

"I love you," she said hugging her arms around him.

"We love you too," he replied, setting her down. He looked more upset than Joan did at this point. Sarah couldn't help but wonder if John was the one having the meltdown instead of his daughter.

"If you need anything just call us," he said looking at them both.

"I think we can handle it, we're going to have fun, right?," Tom asked, looking down at the little girl.

Joan nodded quickly, obviously warming up to the idea.

Sarah watched John sigh shakily and nod his head.

"Okay," he said a little nervous sounding. Cortana looked like she wanted to practically run out of the house as she all but drug her husband out the front door.

"Do you want to color like last time?," Tom asked kindly. Joan crossed her arms and shook her head 'no.'

"Well what do you want to do?," he asked patiently.

"I want to make dinner," she said authoritatively.

"Okay," said Sarah.

Joan hoisted herself up on the counter tops and reached for a datapad that had cookbooks on it. She flipped through it and declared "Let's make this," to a large chocolate cake.

"We can't eat chocolate cake for dinner," said Tom.

"Why not?," she asked, clearly confused.

"Because it's not healthy, how about we make a chocolate cake but we order in dinner?," he asked.

"Good move," said Sarah. She didn't really want to cook dinner with a particular three year old.

So Sarah ordered in and Tom started cake making. Joan was very insistent upon measuring ingredients herself and turning on the oven.

Surprisingly dinner went well.

Joan helped frost the chocolate cake after they had eaten the delivery food and got plenty of the frosting all over herself. She giggled the whole time, licking her sticky fingers and smearing some on Tom.

God that's cute, I think my ovaries are tingling.

Sarah groaned.

"What's wrong?"

"She's just really cute," she sighed.

Tom chuckled.

They ate the cake and she proceeded to get herself so messy that they had to give her a bath.

Sarah took off her clothes and chucked them in a hamper in her bedroom but she ran away and started running naked through the halls, thinking it was funny for them to try and catch her.

Sarah chased her through to the living room. She was running around in circles, naked and covered in chocolate giggling.

Holy shit, she's fast.

"I don't think normal toddlers move this fast," said Sarah to Tom, watching her run around and bounce on the couch.

Sarah had to exert a significant amount of effort to be quick enough to catch her but not too rough that she would accidentally break something.

She giggled as she kicked her legs, jokingly trying to get away.

Strong too, if I didn't try to prevent her from slipping away she'd get out.

Tom turned on the bathwater and Joan giggled, blowing bubbles in the water and splashing enthusiastically.

"This is my shampoo," she said pointing at a bottle with a duck on it.

Tom squirted a small amount in his hands and scrubbed her hair free of chocolate frosting. She squinted her eyes when he dumped water over her head to rinse and coughed out some water that she'd accidentally swallowed.

Then she very quickly took a pump of what was clearly John's shampoo and squirted it in the tub.

And she started breaking out into a rash.

"Shit, what is that?," asked Sarah, pulling her out of the tub and draining the water.

She groaned and took the shower head and sprayed her off but she already had a spotty red rash forming on her legs.

"Well it doesn't seem to be bothering her," he said lightly.

"Yeah but now we look like idiots," she groaned, toweling Joan off and taking her to her room to put her in pajamas.

John checked his tablet for what must have been the third time in the last hour.

"John, she's fine," said Cortana, picking at her dessert.

John sighed.

"I'm sorry, you're right," he put the tablet on the ground.

Cortana smiled softly. "It's okay. I'm sorry I got angry with you. I'm happy that you're a good father, I really truly am. I just...sometimes I do miss when it was just us," she said quietly.

"Don't feel badly about that, I miss it too sometimes."

She looked surprised. "Really? You just...you're a really good father, you seem so happy."

"I am happy, I love our daughter but it doesn't mean that I don't get lonely sometimes."

"Lonely?," she asked, taking a sip of her aperitif.

"I lived for years with you inside my head, it was difficult to adjust to it being just me again," he said quietly.

She felt herself get warm.

"That's maybe the most romantic thing you've ever said to me," she said quietly.

He laughed. "You've heard me think worse, don't think I couldn't tell when you were rifling around in my brain."

She blushed a little bit.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "When I would be doing armor maintenance or eating in the galley when I would mysteriously recall thoughts about how I liked the sound of your voice or that I had a dream with you in it the night prior? Is that ringing any bells?"

Cortana laughed. "And here I thought I was being sneaky, I guess I wasn't so clandestine."

John thought back to the dreams he used to have of himself and Cortana. They hadn't been anything too strange, usually just dreams of them talking or doing something together, like sitting outside or in a pelican together. Sometimes he had dreams that she was just another soldier fighting alongside him. Other times she would be a civilian and they would meet by chance. He hadn't understood why or how he had had dreams like that, he'd never lived a civilian lifestyle and didn't even know how to think about it. He wouldn't have understood the idea of going out on a date like this, and he probably would have been too dense, too focused to even really think of Cortana in that light back then.

He was happy to have this time with her. She had made a great effort to look nice, even going out and buying a dress. It was dark blue and wrapped around her, accentuating all of his favorite features of hers, from her hips and breasts to her eyes. He knew that she had done that very intentionally, she knew him well.

The restaurant was in the hotel they were staying at so it was simply charged to their account. They went upstairs to the suite they had rented and lit a fire.

Cortana ordered a bottle of champagne to their room.

She carefully popped open the bottle and poured it into the champagne flutes. She looked at him coyly as she raised her glass to his. "To us," she said simply.

He felt a little embarrassed at how much she affected him. "To us," he agreed. He clinked his glass with hers and took a sip.

There's no way this was cheap, Cortana probably ordered the most expensive bottle on the menu just because she could.

"You look very beautiful," he said after he'd finished his glass and poured himself another.

"You look nice," she said, smiling at him. She quickly finished her second glass of champagne, got up and sat on his lap, resting her arms on his shoulders.

"But you know I prefer you without clothes," she said playfully, leaning in to kiss him.

He was where she was in seconds, his hand buried in her hair and his other gripping her thigh.

_God its been way too long. _

Sarah sighed.

"I had no idea that putting a three year old to bed was so difficult.

How many stories did she demand we read?," she asked, sitting herself down on the couch.

"I think five," said Tom, sitting down and cracking himself a beer.

She looked at him. He looked tired, but he was pretty good with kids. Better than she would've expected considering he almost never spent time around them.

"Do you want children?," she asked quietly. She knew there were certain implications with the question but couldn't help but asking.

"Someday, but I need to make Admiral first so I could maybe spend some time with them," he sighed.

"You think Admirals have more time?"

"No really, but I could probably delegate to Captains a little more, deal with policy and people which I'm good at."

She shrugged.

"Everyone reports to someone," she said cynically.

"True. I just don't want to have kids and never see them. But I'm getting old so maybe I won't."

She scoffed.

"You're not old. Besides, I'm like eight years younger than you."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh so you're thinking of me having kids with you," he said snarkily.

She blushed. "Well no, I, well, I mean, if youâ€"

He burst out laughing.

She smack him on his arm irritatedly.

"Fine, I don't want your stupid babies," she grumbled. He just laughed harder until she started laughing too.

"So, do you wanna hit up that jacuzzi Cortana was talking about?," she asked when they stopped laughing.

"Thought you'd never ask," he chuckled.

They stopped by Joan's room and pressed their ears to the door to be sure she was sleeping, or at least not making any noise before they went back into the master bedroom and took off their clothes.

Surprisingly, Tom had more scars than she did. He had a few gunshot wounds and a lot of scars from his cytoprethaline allergy. She knew they irritated him but she didn't really pay them any mind.

She loved her Spartan body. She loved being tall and strong. She felt

invincible as a Spartan, even though she knew she was actually quite the opposite—she had had plenty of Spartans under her command die. She thought of DeMarco and him hitting on her and couldn't help but chuckle.

_What a guy he was. _

She slipped into the hot bath and sighed.

"Damn, these guys live large," she said, enjoying the feeling of the warm water on her skin. She leaned back and closed her eyes, relaxing in the water.

"How was your day today?," he asked lightly. He turned on the jets. The tub filled up so that the water flowed over the edge, warmed up and cycled through again so it stayed continuously warm and pleasant.

"Eh, it was fine, went on a ruck which I haven't done in a while so that was fun, no armor or anything so that was cool. Then I did a bunch of paperwork, had to go down to ONI for a while to deal with some spook bullshit and then I met up with you."

She thought of her day in detail.

"I also bumped into that other Spartan—II, the one that's the Admiral's assistant," she said lightly.

Tom knew when she said _the Admiral _she meant Admiral Osman. When they talked about _the _Admiral, it was always her. She was easily the most powerful people in the galaxy so it singled her out a little bit.

"Yeah? You guys talk about anything?"

Sarah shook her head.

"She makes me feel awkward," she said lightly.

"Why, that's ridiculous," he said wiggling his toes in the water.

She shrugged.

Tom knew she still felt bad about the Spartan—IIs and the pressure she felt in trying to live up to them. Tom had limited interactions with the Spartan she was talking about, but the few times he had seen her she was either engrossed in the Admiral's schedule or her ODST boyfriend. They were always getting lunch together, always walking around together, Tom didn't think they were separated any more than they needed to be.

"You should know you probably think about the whole thing more than they do," he said softly.

"I know, I should probably go see a shrink or something," she deflected.

They sat in the bathtub for a little bit longer. It wasn't an intensely sexual experience despite being naked but it was extremely

relaxing.

She got out of the tub and slipped on a bathrobe Cortana had clearly laid out for her.

"She's a great host, I can't believe she went to this much trouble for us to babysit her kid," she said lightly.

"I think she _really_ _wanted_ this night out, I'm glad we could do something for them," he said putting on his own robe.

Tom started cleaning himself up for bed and Sarah went into the main bedroom.

She looked around. The bed was _huge_. She supposed that John was a large man but _damn_. _She looked over and saw a door open to a closet.

Don't be nosy, don't be nosy.

She gave up rather quickly and walked in.

Cortana has a lot of clothes.

Everything from fine cashmere to summer dresses were stocked in her wardrobe. She supposed if you were a civilian you actually had to think about what you wore. She opened a drawer and saw some very, very beautiful pieces of silky lingerie.

Damn, I need to get myself some of this stuff.

"Sarah what are you _doing?_", Tom asked, standing in the door of the closet looking at his girlfriend holding up a skimpy piece of lingerie.

"Stop acting like you're better than me and look through the Master Chief's closet with me."

"This is bad," he said, though he clearly had no intention of stopping.

He turned to John's side of the closet. He had _way_ _more_ clothes than he would have guessed. He also hung up his t-shirts instead of folding them which Tom found interesting. He opened a drawer and saw, of all things, a paper book.

_Why would he hide a book like this? _

He had to look at it.

The cover was blank but he opened it to the title page.

I Love Female Orgasm: An Extraordinary Orgasm Guide

"Dear God," he said.

"What is it?" She turned around and looked over his shoulder.

Her eyes widened a fraction and she shook her head in disbelief.

"God bless John" 117, that's all I've got to say. God bless that man," she started laughing so hard she started to cry.

Tom tried his best to put the book back in its place as carefully as he could.

"What a guy, saves the galaxy multiple times over and gets his wife off," she said walking into the guest room that Cortana had set up and fell down on the bed.

"Keep talking like that and I'll start to get jealous," he said seriously.

She stood up and looked at him.

"You don't need a book though," she said lowly. She let her bathrobe drop to the ground.

He smiled.

"_Damn,_ " Cortana sighed, falling back down on the bed and running a hand through her hair.

"I think we've made up for some lost time tonight," she sighed, her heart still racing in her chest. She sighed and rested her head on his chest, listening to his own heart beat quickly.

_I will never, ever tire of that sound. _

The sound of his heart was everything to her. It always had been, from the moment she met him to when she had left him, his heart was all that mattered to her. She laced her fingers in his and closed her eyes.

"I love you John, I'm sorry for any distance between us lately," she said softly.

She felt him shake his head.

"No, it's my fault too. I need to take care of you. You work hard."

She looked up at him.

"Look at us, both of us acting all sorry," she chuckled.

He kissed her again. He hadn't taken the time to simply kiss her and enjoy her in recent memory. It was easy to forget how transient their lives were, how time could just melt away.

He loved how she kissed him. She was soft and beautiful and everything about her was perfect for him. He never could've imagined the feelings he felt for her. He also couldn't imagine his life without her. It was an impossibility. She was everything to him. Not only that, she was the mother of his daughter and that meant more to him than he ever could've known. He kissed her on her neck like he knew she liked. She craned her head back making it easier for him and sighed.

"Again?," she gasps, a clearly a little shocked.

"You were the one," he kisses down her throat and the tops of her breasts, "who was talking about how we didn't," he kisses underneath her breasts and she gasps again, "take enough time for each other," she moans loudly and he can't help but smile.

Her physical responses are a language he knows how to read, and he can feel the storm building in her body in the way her stomach tenses when he lets a hand run along it or the glassy look in her eyes when he catches them.

"If you can keep up I've got plenty more," she growls, sitting up and wrapping her legs around his waist.

"I'll be fine," he says, his hands gripping her tightly.

She can't help but admire his form. The striations of his chest muscles are thrown into sharp relief by the soft light of the room coming from the soothing lamps and candles she lit.

"Don't have to tell me twice," she says cockily. She leans down and kisses him again, moving her hips against his and doesn't even care how greedy she's being.

He swore in between kisses and pushed her down onto the bed. She felt him clutch her thigh harder, hard enough that she thinks it might bruise but she knows he can't help it, and she can't really help but enjoy it. She hadn't thought about it until she had a body but something about the raw strength he possessed made her feel a little crazy.

"You haven't been this impatient before," she breathed against his ear, settling her knees on either side of his hips.

He swept a hand through her tousled hair and enjoyed its coarse texture as it fell through his fingers and the way her breasts pressed against his skin.

"Can't help it," he replied lowly.

It was all frantic and ragged, almost involuntary. A bead of sweat started to track down his face.

When they finished this time, it was with groans and bodies pressed flush together, his strong hands gripping her hips tightly and her name on his lips. When it was over, their lips met softly, chastely even.

He closed his eyes and let his body feel completely heavy. He couldn't move, all he could feel was his useless limbs and her soft skin against his.

After a few minutes he turned off the lights and crawled under the covers with her.

"I love you, Cortana," he said softly, kissing her softly on the crown of her head.

"I love you too John," she replied, closing her eyes and falling

asleep.

Sarah couldn't help but notice when the couple came back in the morning they had quite the spring in their step. Even the normally stoic Master Chief had a smile on his face.

_Someone definitely had a good time. _

Cortana hugged her she was so thankful.

"Thank you both so much for coming," she said quietlyâ€"Joan was still sleeping.

"It was no problem, she has a bit of a rash from something in the soap she insisted on putting in her bath but she was fine, read books, went to bed fine," said Tom.

"Wonderful, thank you again," she said happily.

Sarah sighed as they walked back to the train station.

"Can we agree on not having kids for a while?," she said, clearly tired.

Tom smiled. They had never really talked about the future. It was still difficult for them, when the future had once been such an uncertainty. But now it was something they could think of, and he knew he wanted a future with her, whatever kind of future it was.

He grabbed her hand and paid for their train tickets.

"Not for a while," he said softly. He kissed her on the cheek and she smiled softly.

Tom Lasky you're a good guy.

Joan woke up and was absolutely delighted to see her parents home.

"Daddy!," she yelled when she came out into the living and saw her father. She ran to him and jumped up into his arms, hugging him and giving him a kiss.

He chuckled. "You'd think I had been gone for a year," he said more to Cortana than to Joan. She reached for her mother and John handed her to Cortana.

"Hi sweetie, did you have a nice time with Sarah and Tom?," she asked.

She nodded excitedly.

"How about we get you dressed and then we go out for breakfast?"

"Do I get pancakes?"

"If you would like," she replied.

"And orange juice?"

Cortana laughed. "All the orange juice you could possibly want."

Joan smiled and Cortana took her to go get dressed.

_I love that child. _

Even if being a parent was sometimes difficult, John knew it brought him more joy than he ever could've imagined.

Cortana brushed Joan's hair quickly and dressed her in her boots and tights with a little dress that was purple.

My kid is so well dressed.

"Ready for breakfast?," she asked brightly. Joan was so excited she jumped up and down. She loved going out for breakfast on a Sunday. She could always tell it was a special occasion.

John smiled when she came out dressed in a little purple dress with little flowers printed on it.

"Come on Dad, let's _go_," she insisted, grabbing his coat for him of the doorknob excitedly. He laughed at her eagerness. He loved her enthusiasm for just about anything.

"Thank-you," he said politely taking the coat. He looked at her smile and her sweet little face and tiny little hands that reached for his.

She is my perfect little girl.

It had been nice to have a break from everything before Fred and Kelly came to visit, but he wouldn't trade this little girl for anything.

* * *

><p>And here we are. I hope you all enjoyed. Until next time. Please review it brightens my day and makes my heart sing!<p>

PS: That book is a real book and I recommend it for all, men and women alike. Life changing and I'll leave it at that.

30. Chapter 30

A little bit shorter for the fast update, but next one should follow in a similar way. Couple things ahead. Warning for extreme Marine mouth. I am not a Marine, but I have deployed with Marines, hung out with Marines, yada yada and this is just kinda how it is. It's part of their charm. :P Also got some Kilo-5 stuff coming up. They're my favs so you'll be seeing more of them in this story, at least while we're on Earth. :) Also, I'm in the Air Force, so I'm allowed to make fun of the Air Force. (For any AF readers out there, lol). Enjoy!

* * *

><p>"Why are you not in PT gear, what do you think this is, the Air Force?!"<p>

Vaz watched the newly minted ODS'Ts he was in charge of scramble to take off their gear they had put on for a ruck that he hadn't scheduled and run back to their barracks to get their PT gear.

"You better make it quick or you'll regret it," he hollered a little half heartedly.

_If I had known becoming a Staff Sergeant meant becoming a babysitter I would've stayed a Lance Corporal forever. _

"I thought you died on Cersei IV."

_That voice. _

He turned around to see a short, tan, brunette he thought he'd never see again.

"Clearly I didn't, DeLeon," he said sarcastically.

He watched her look him over from head to toe and smile a little.

_Yeah she's still hot. _

"I see that," she sauntered over and flicked the ONI insignia on the sleeve of his PT shirt.

"When did you become a fucking spook, should I be scared you'll come kill me in my sleep?"

"Prior assignment. Once you get the clearance you're supposed to wear the insignia unless the mission dictates otherwise," he said blankly.

"I'm still sleeping with an eye open," she said with the slightest hint of suggestion.

They'd had fun. He'd been on his third tour of the Galaxy, she on her second. It'd been a rough one, at the peak of Covenant destruction. They hadn't been serious about much of anything except seeing each other naked and staying alive. She was nice enough and they had both essentially agreed to using the other one for comfort. It had been a harmonious system, he had just never imagined that they'd both make it through the war. Most people he knew during that time he wrote off as dead or worse and he moved on.

With her arms crossed and her breasts straining against her tight fitting PT shirt, Sincera DeLeon was not dead.

She chuckled. "So you reupped and got stuck taking care of boots too?"

"Pretty much," he said. "Speaking of where are my hideous, pathetic excuses for ODS'Ts?" He craned his neck and saw them sprinting as quickly as they could from the barracks.

"Back to work," she said, watching her females run towards her, more quickly than his male troops did. She yelled some profanity laced insult at them and they started their exercises.

"Let's get lunch," she said, looking over her shoulder as she formed up her ODSs and started calling cadence for their morning run.

I am not calling cadence unless the damn Lieutenant comes down here and makes me. No fucking way.

He'd been in too long to care about moto bullshit like that. On the rare occasion he felt like calling cadence, he did it right but at 0500 the last thing he usually wanted to do was run around shouting at the top of his lungs with a bunch of boots. He at least had control over if he was screaming his head off.

"Form up, like yesterday," he said irritably.

For the entire hour of their run, all he could think about was Sincera and how he didn't _really_ want to go to lunch with her, but he didn't really have an excuse not to as Naomi was too busy to grab lunch with him.

They hadn't had anything serious together, but they had fucked each other a few more times than would be appropriate to call them just friends. He'd had serious girlfriends before but _nothing_ like what he had with Naomi. He'd also never dated such a complex person and he knew she had many insecurities. He didn't know if it was a good idea for him to be palling around with someone who'd had his cock in her mouth.

_Do I tell Naomi I have a past with her? _

The entire thing was distracting him and giving him a headache.

_I can keep this professional. I need to, we're supposed to be PTing our Marines together every morning. _

He didn't really have a choice.

He pushed through the morning and broke for lunch around 1, before he would lead a twelve mile ruck.

Happy Monday.

"Hey, Beloi, over here," he heard Sincera bark. He grabbed himself a glass of water and sat down at the picnic table on the deck. There were plenty of other people out here taking lunch. It was a huge station so it had tons of resources, like patios for lunch.

He unpacked his food.

Naomi had packed him a lunch. She had taken to making ridiculous things when she was bored. This lunch featured a radish carved into the shape of a flower, a sandwich on homemade sourdough bread and orange juice he knew Naomi surely had squeezed herself.

Sincera glanced over at his lunch but didn't comment as she took a bite of her own food.

"So, where did you go after _Harbinger_?," she asked.

"Here and there, not many places I haven't been at this point," he

deflected.

"Must've been some serious spook crap if you can't even say where you went," she said lightly.

"You have _no _idea."

Oh the stories I could tell. Serious spook crap doesn't even begin to cover it.

"So how long you been here?"

"About three years."

Her eyebrows raised. "Wait seriously? That's insane, I've never had an assignment last that long, do you got some friends in high places?"

He shrugged. "Think I'm just lucky."

_I have friends in the highest of places now. _

He never would have guessed that being hand picked by Margaret Parangosky would've changed his life so much. Then again, he couldn't possibly understand the type of power an Admiral wielded in ONI.

"I've been here a week and I could get used to this, beaches beat deep space, am I right?"

They caught up on the last six years. Vaz had to admit, it was nice seeing an old face. It was a luxury he hadn't had for a while. Most faces familiar to him were gone.

She chucked her paper bag and sat back down.

"So you haven't let yourself go or anything, wanna hook up?," she said casually.

He wasn't really surprised. In fact, it would've been a little strange if she hadn't asked. She was a pretty cut-and-dry person and they'd had a certain amount of chemistry together that, were he single, he probably wouldn't have minded rediscovering.

"I'm actually seeing someone right now."

She frowned slightly. "That's a shame, we had a good time. What's she do?"

When she asked that he knew she was assuming that his girlfriend was in the military.

"She's actually a civilian contractor, she's Admiral Osman's assistant."

_Lying by omission, that's the ONI way. _

Her eyes widened. "Shit man, that's where you got the sweet assignment and the high up pals!"

"We weren't dating before I was stationed here," he said a little irritated. Even the mere suggestion of him being with Naomi for any reason besides loving her so much that it was actually painful for him was a little irritating. Frankly, he could've had a relationship fraught with far less peril and emotional trial if he had wanted an easy lay. There's no shame in wanting that, it's pretty much all Mal ever did, but it was pretty much the opposite of what he had with Naomi.

_I love that woman but my dick is so fucking sick of my right hand.

-

He shook his head.

_Stop that. Right now. _

Anytime he had a thought like that he shoved it as far away as he could. He had emotionally prepared himself for the fact that he and Naomi might not have sex anytime in the near future or even ever. It was worth it to him. He loved her and she deserved to be loved. That didn't mean it wasn't fucking hard, especially when you were propositioned for casual sex by a coworker you happened to know you had _amazing _casual sex with.

"Well, if anything changes, let me know," she said dryly.

* * *

><p>John watched Cortana paced excitedly at the port, waiting for Fred and Kelly's ship to come in.<p>

"Dad I'm _bored,_" complained Joan.

"I know, me too but it won't be long until Aunt Kelly, Uncle Fred and cousin Sam are here with us, that'll be fun. Why don't you practice counting the people as they walk by?," he said calmly. She started counting loudly, point at the people until she got to fifty and forgot what came next and started over again.

_At least that keeps her busy. _

"John I think I see them," said Cortana excitedly, waving eagerly.

When Cortana was sure it was Kelly, she ran to her and all but jumped on her in the most eager display of affection John had ever seen from her.

"I've missed you so much," she said to her friend, holding her tightly. Kelly laughed and hugged her back, dropping her bag on the ground.

"I missed you too."

Cortana looked over at Sam who looked like she had just woken up from a nap and was being carried by Fred.

She gasped. "Sammy you look so _big_, " she said, reaching out for the little girl's hand and kissing her on her cheek. Sam smiled softly, though she was still clearly tired from the long trip.

John looked at Fred, and noted that he'd grown quite an impressive amount of facial hair and his hair had grown out of anything that even resembled a regulation hair cut.

_Must be going for the whole artist thing. _

Joan jumped up into Kelly's arms quickly, even surprising her a little bit.

"Wow, you are _huge_!," she said, hitching her up on her hip.

"I missed you Auntie Kelly I'm going to show you all of my new toys!," she said loudly. John chuckled.

Kelly sighed and smiled at John.

"It's so good to see you," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder while she held Joan with her other hand.

"Let's get back home so you guys can settle in," he said picking up some of their bags for them.

Cortana and Kelly chatted animatedly the whole way home.

"You have _no _idea how boring it's been without you guys at home," said Kelly in the elevator up to the apartment.

"Wow, nice place," said Fred, glancing around.

"Yeah it's a ridiculous place, we're excited to get back home but it's fun for now," she said leading them to where they could put their stuff.

John started making food for all of them while Cortana chatted with Kelly and Joan and Sam played together.

Sam quickly ran around the house reminding him of her mother, despite the fact that she fell down often, tripping over her feet and hopping right back up as if nothing happened.

He pulled something out of the oven and felt her pulling on his leg. He looked down and saw Sam stretching her arms up toward him.

"Do you want to be picked up?," he asked.

She nodded.

He couldn't help but smile. He'd missed this little girl. He'd taken care of her while she was a baby and Kelly and Fred were working. She was so sweet and even-tempered, very different from her pseudo cousin who could sometimes seem like a little demon. He held Sam in one arm and brought dinner to the table with his other arm. She snuggled up to him and he knew she was about to fall asleep.

She had a big moppy head of curly brown hair. He knew that Kelly just couldn't bring herself to cut it, much like he had a difficult time cutting Joan's hair.

They all sat down to dinner and it felt just like it had been months

ago, except now they were on Earth.

"I can take her if you want," said Kelly gesturing to Sam.

"It's okay, I can just go put her in Joan's room."

She was clearly exhausted from the trip.

"So your gallery opens next week, are you nervous?," Cortana asked Fred.

He shrugged. "Not really, people will either like it or they won't, that's just kind of how these things work. I'm happy with it and that's all that really matters."

"So we've been invited over to visit with Serin-019 and Naomi-010 for a cookout this weekend, they live together and have their own people," said John lightly.

Kelly's eyes widened. "That sounds like fun! They didn't really seem interested in seeing us much when I saw them on Onyx years ago so that's a somewhat pleasant surprise," she said.

"I saw both of them a few weeks ago, they're both well."

"Gosh, I hadn't expected this trip to be so exciting. Cortana, we _have _to go out around the city tomorrow, I've never been somewhere so huge!"

Cortana laughed. "Okay, we'll leave the girls with John and Fred and we can go out and do whatever we want," she smiled.

They went to bed that evening early, everyone was exhausted from the excitement, though John was pretty sure he heard Joan and Sam up late playing with toys past their bedtime. He should've gotten up and told them to go to sleep but he just couldn't bring himself to do it.

Joan will grow up with family.

Fred, Kelly and Sam really were family in the truest sense of the word. The thought made him happy as he fell asleep.

* * *

><p>Every morning they PTed together and every other day they tortured their boots together, be it in exercises or simulations of orbital drops.<p>

Even though he'd spent a reasonable amount of time sleeping with her, he hadn't really known her and he was a little surprised at how well they actually got along. Vaz had a hard time finding people he could spend large amounts of time with and not end up wanting to strangle them, so it was a welcome change. Sure she gave him a flirty once over every now and then but it seemed just a part of her personality, kind of like Mal.

He was putting his weapon away and about to take his squad over to a crashed pelican simulation. DeLeon already had hers all lined up and ready.

"Staff Sergeant Beloi hurry your asses up!," she yelled.

His little squad he was in charge of was bull shitting and getting things ready.

"Hurry the fuck up, when I was on my first tour I got this pretty souvenir," he pointed at his face, "wrestling a hinge-head and I'm taking you to a simulation right now. Least you can do is appreciate that you're not actually dropping into hell every other fucking day," he grumbled. He couldn't help but not really understand what Marines and ODSs were supposed to do in a peaceful time like this, but from what he gathered they were supposed to keep pounding the ground like the grunts they were until otherwise notified.

They buttoned it and quickly packed their bags.

He stepped outside into the hot sun. Everyone was silent.

"What's going on?," he looked over at DeLeon who looked like her eyes were about to pop out of her head.

In the sun and her usual outfit of grey leggings, tight fitted tshirt, braid, and black boots was Naomi.

"Vasily, is it a bad time?," she asked quietly, ignoring the wide eyed stares and slack jawed expressions.

He looked over at Sergeant DeLeon.

"Do you mind if Iâ€"

"No, go ahead, I'll, um," she glanced distractedly at Naomi again but turned and addressed the squad, "Everyone take five, inspect your gear or something," she said half-heartedly.

"I'm sorry, I forgot that you had new a new squad starting this week," she said in her soft-spoken way.

He smiled. Hearing her voice made him happy.

"No it's not a problem. What do you need?"

Naomi glanced over at the female Sergeant quickly.

"Can we stay at your place tonight?"

The Admiral needs the house tonight, for one reason or another. Naomi should have the clearance.

"Don't you have the requiredâ€"

"I don't want to spend the night without you," she said so quietly he nearly didn't hear her.

He felt bashful. Which was very strange for him. He never had been around someone like her who could make him feel like a teenager with a crush again. Maybe it was something about her falling in love for the first time that just rubbed off on him but it was a pretty amazing feeling.

"I'm sorry, I didn't," she glanced over at the ODSs who were cleaning their rifles but very clearly trying to listen to their conversation, "I couldn't just message you I can't trust that method of communication to be secure and my living situation is...she normally tries to keep things out of the house but I guess it was unavoidable this evening."

Naomi cleared her throat awkwardly.

"I didn't mean to interrupt you, I'll see you tomorrow," she turned around to leave and he grabbed her hand.

"Naomi," he felt embarrassed with all the people he knew were trying their best to pay attention to him. "Of course it's fine if you come over." He was astounded she felt a need to ask. He hadn't spent a night at his own place in weeks, he was always by her in the evening.

He watched tension leave her shoulders. She had clearly felt anxious about this conversation for whatever reason.

She nodded and smiled.

"Okay, I'll swing by after work, will you be done around 1700?"

He looked over at DeLeon. "Yeah, we should be."

She let go of his hand and he could see her blush a little. He was surprised that she was being so shy but then he realized she wasn't shy about asking to stay over, she was shy about all of the other people there. He had forgotten how awkward she initially was, she was really uncomfortable with new people.

He didn't want to introduce her to DeLeon. Not only was it just awkward, now wasn't the time with all of his subordinates standing around waiting to go to a simulation.

She started walking as quickly as she could away. He knew she wanted to run but didn't want to draw even more attention to herself.

Vaz looked over at the group and cleared his throat.

"Alright let's get going," he said awkwardly.

They ran the simulation and he was proud that none of them blacked out when they had to practice getting out of the drop pods in gear underwater. They were clearly still being trained correctly.

He put his gear away and changed into shorts and a t-shirt. "Naomi had messaged him later asking if he wanted to go for a run before they went home. She liked running with him. He knew she always took it slow so they could run casually and talk. He waited for her outside. It was way the hell on the other end of the post than where she worked but it had better paths for running, less crowded by important people.

"You said your girlfriend was a civilian."

He turned around and saw DeLeon, her arms crossed and glaring at

him.

"She _is _a civilian."

She scoffed. "Whatever man, I don't know how you met her but I know a Spartan when I see one, most people do."

He glared at her. He didn't like it when people insinuated things about Naomi. He knew she stood out. That's the way he liked her.

"She's retired. I also don't get why you feel like you were entitled to know details about my girlfriend."

She huffed. "Oh, I don't know, because we spent the large majority of a tour together jumping from orbit and fucking each other senselessâ€"

She stopped talking abruptly.

"Vasya?"

_Shit. Fucking shit shit shit. _

He turned and looked at Naomi. She didn't look shocked, upset, annoyed, angry, or really anything. She looked indifferent.

That scared him. Whenever she made that face, it was usually when she was upset. It was her go to _I am uncomfortable _reaction. Whenever something bothered her, she simply shoved it away under a mask of Spartan indifference mastered through years of training and indoctrination.

Naomi turned her gaze on DeLeon, she _really _looked at her.

To the Staff Sergeant's credit, she didn't flinch or look away.

"I don't think we've met. I'm Naomi Sentzke," she extended her hand.

"Staff Sergeant Sincera DeLeon," she said lowly. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Vaz had never felt so awkward in his life. He also was a little surprised that Naomi didn't crush DeLeon's handâ€"it would've been easy for her.

"See you Monday, Staff," se DeLeon, slinging her backpack over her shoulder. Vaz didn't say anything. The silence between him and Naomi felt deafening.

"Naomi Iâ€"

She ignored him and started running.

He took that as his cue to follow.

Fuck, this whole thing is not going to be easy to explain to my virgin child soldier girlfriend.

* * *

><p>Poor Vaz, he's caught in a hard place. Don't worry, it'll all get better. :P Til next time, thanks for reviewing!<p>

31. Chapter 31

So you guys have endured some short chapters lately, so I nearby gift you with this 6500 word wonder. I also apologize for the lack of John and Cortana this chapter, I had to resolve this Vaz/Naomi plot. I really hope you guys enjoy, I fucking love this chapter.

****EDIT:** I posted another story today, it's totally different from this one but if you like my work, give it a glance! I'll plug it next chapter then stop. Lol. ******

ALSO, is anyone else EXTREMELY disappointed with Halo: Nightfall? Spoiler: I think the whole Aiken being 'unspartaned' is fucking dumb. You can't take titanium (btw, spartan-II ossification isn't done with fucking titanium, it's done with carbide GODDAMIT GET YOUR CANON SHIT RIGHT 343,) I just don't get why it was necessary to like, make him half spartan half like, tall civilian guy. It's effed up. I quote my Husband while watching Halo Nightfall: "Oh Sergeant Locke you're so great you're going to make such a great playable character," -pantomimes shooting self-. Pretty much sums up how I feel and makes me fearful for Halo 5. I I'm just extremely disappointed. I could've written something way better than this weird excuse for plot advancement, and I'm not proclaiming myself to be this prolific author or Halo, I just like Halo enough to actually care about checking my motherfucking facts and like, actually consulting sources when writing military dialogue if I don't know something. Maybe they should start looking around on fanfic for competent Halo writers. :P :P Or just ask Karen Travis to write something because she's the shit. Does anyone else think Kilo-5 would've made an AMAZING live action series? It's perfect, you have the perfect characters for like, political intrigue, drama, action, even a bit of romance...It would be like scifi game of thrones if they did a live action series based on Kilo-5 or like, a military drama on ONI. Ugh. Missed opportunities man.

* * *

><p>She was running way faster than she would normally run with him. She was by no means running as quickly as he knew she could. No, it was almost like she was running at exactly the point he would be able to keep up but it would be extremely miserable for him to do so. Normally they jogged and chatted about their day, talked about what was going on in their lives and perhaps watched the sun set over the ocean.

Today was not one of those days.

Right when he thought he was going to need to walk because he couldn't keep up any longer, she ran to the parking lot and stopped at the car.

She watched him catch his breath and passed him a bottle of water with detachment he simply wasn't used to from her anymore.

"Thank-you," he said softly. She didn't respond and just leaned up against the side of the car.

Right when he finished drinking and was about to speak up, she got into the car.

The ride was awkward. Everytime he thought of sometime to say, he realized it could be easily misconstrued.

She pulled up to the flat he shared with Mal.

"Maybe it's best if I do go home this evening."

He frowned.

"Naomi?"

"What?," she said irritably.

"Is there?" please," he couldn't find the words to say what he meant. He didn't want her to be upset with him. He loved her, he'd do anything for her.

"Please, stay over. We can order in that place you like."

He watched her frown and lean back in her seat.

"Are you sure you don't have better things to do?," she asked softly, her voice wavering slightly revealing exactly how hurt she was feeling.

He knew she wasn't a petty woman. This wasn't simple jealousy, it ran far deeper and he understood that.

"Naomi," he grabbed her hand, "There is absolutely nothing I would rather do than spend time with you." The idea that he didn't want to be around her was almost laughable to him even though he knew it wasn't to her.

She turned off the car and parked it on the side of the road.

Though she had visited his place before, she'd never spent the night.

He realized he hadn't told Mal she was staying over so he reached for his tablet and texted him.

_Hey Naomi is staying over. Please don't do something that will traumatize her. _

"I'm gonna shower quick."

She sat on the couch and nodded at him.

After he was done, he changed into civvies and sat down by her. He had to talk to her.

"About DeLeon-

"It's fine," she replied shortly.

"No, it's not, you're clearly upset."

She wrung her hands. "I'm not upset."

He looked at her and even she couldn't deny the accusation.

She sighed. "I shouldn't be. I know you had a life before me and I know that involved other women. I just can't help but feel badly."

"Why does the fact that I've slept with her make you feel badly?"

"Oh come on Vaz, you don't think I hear what people whisper about Spartanâ€"IIs? Spartan prude, robot, I can't help but wonder how much truth to it there is and if so, should I be with someone like you who's normal and has had normal relationships before."

Hearing her speak so poorly of herself made him feel sick. She always thought in terms of what she wasn't instead of how she was quite literally one of the most perfect people possible. He understood in some ways. She had never been a civilian before and navigating a new life like that must have been harder than he could imagine, but he felt badly that she felt like she wasn't good at anything besides being an instrument of war, especially since she had so much love to give.

"First of all, I wouldn't call fucking someone behind a cryopod because you're afraid you'll die the next day normal, but that aside, I don't want normal, I want _you,_" he said.

"I fail to understand why."

He scoffed. Even though he understood it, it was extremely frustrating to him when he thought with this kind of mentality. He knew that she was beyond fucked up from a stolen childhood and her bizarre relationship with her father, but he understood that and he didn't care.

"I can't make you see how wonderful you are. I can't explain to you what makes me love you but you can either choose to believe me or not," he said simply.

She smiled softly and grabbed his hand. "I'll try to work on it."

She got a message from Mal.

She smiled reading it aloud to Vaz. "Mal says: 'Don't let him get too handsy, can't promise anything about not coming home shitfaced with a stripper and a new tattoo because it's a day that ends in Y, but especially because it's a Friday.'"

She started laughing.

"Movie and order in?," he asked, picking up the remote. She smiled.

"Would you judge me if I changed into pajamas this early?"

He scoffed. "Only if you judge me for doing the same thing."

She laughed and changed into her pajamas, comfy blue flannel pants and a fitted white tank top.

Vaz ordered what he knew as Naomi's favorite and a six pack of beer. Naomi went into the kitchen and made some drinks.

"Hey, do you want rum or whiskey?," she asked as she shook her own drink.

"Whatever you're having," he said as he scrolled through on-demand movies.

Naomi usually liked military movies, mostly because she didn't really understand references in other movies. She also liked to laugh at them with him because usually they were terribly inaccurate which made for some hilarious commentary between the two of them.

Naomi handed him a drink over the couch and he took a sip.

"Are you trying to liquor me up?," he teased.

"Last time I made you a drink you said it may as well have been juice," she said sitting down by him and pulling out her ponytail. Her white blonde hair had gotten really long, it was almost to her waist. Now that she didn't constantly have it in a bun, she liked not cutting it regularly.

He laughed and put an arm around her.

"How does _Enduring Freedom _sound for our movie night?"

"Sounds good to me," she said, sipping her drink.

The movie was about a war hundreds of years ago, complete with old uniforms and even older looking technology.

"Can you believe that this was considered modern warfare?," Vaz said, watching a Marine call in air strikes with an extremely primitive looking radio.

"It's pretty insane," she agreed.

They laughed at the ridiculously cheesy lines and situations that couldn't possibly have happened.

The patrolling Marines dug themselves trenches to sleep in. Vaz laughed "some things don't change though."

Naomi smiled. "When I was thirteen we crashed a Pelican and we were all stranded in the wilderness for three days. Looking back on it I'm sure they could've found us immediately, and they probably planted the mechanical malfunction to see how we would handle it. I think they wanted to see what we would do. John lead a march back to station. We got long showers and a slow meal that evening."

Hearing her talk like that initially had been hard. He hated thinking

of a tiny, scrawny Naomi being shot at and essentially abused by adults. It was the only childhood she had though, so he liked to hear about it and hear the memories she considered fond.

The movie wrapped up and it was dark out. He turned on a lamp but it only provided a little light, which was honestly kind of nice.

He laid down on the couch. It was a huge, soft couch. It had been the first thing he and Mal had bought for their place. After years of austere ship accommodations, a comfy couch to sit on with a huge TV screen were pretty much all they wanted aside from a roof over their heads.

Naomi yawned and laid down next to him, snuggling up against him on her side. When they laid like this it made him forget that she was about half a foot taller than him. The way she curled up her knees towards her chest and reached for his arm to wrap around herself was so comforting to him. He was surprised at how cuddly she was for someone who was very unfamiliar with affection.

He pulled her closer to him and inhaled deeply. He loved the smell of her hair. He couldn't place exactly what it was, but whatever it was made him feel inexplicable comfort.

He ran his hand through her hair and she made a 'mmmm' noise that he knew meant that she liked what he was doing.

He lost track of time playing with her hair and running his hands over her body from her arms to her stomach. He heard her breathing even out to where he was sure she was sleeping. He felt tired and didn't want to wake her up, it was also Saturday tomorrow so neither of them needed to be anywhere. He turned off the lamp and shut his eyes.

Mal fumbled with the lock outside his apartment, messing up the code a few times before he got it right.

Probably because he was trying to unlock the door while he made out with the girl he'd brought home simultaneously.

When he'd finally managed to figure out the door, he dragged her in, chuckling.

She shoved him against the door and kissed him.

This is why I should stick to ODSTs, I love it when a woman is aggressive.

He stumbled as he tried to lead her to his bedroom and bumped himself against the wall, hitting the light switch and turning them on.

"Shite," he mumbled. His drunk attention span quickly ignored it and tried to take her to his room.

Until she stopped.

He turned to look at her staring at the couch. He looked and saw what appeared to be Vaz and Naomi, snuggled up together underneath a blanket asleep.

Naomi groaned and put her arm over her eyes, trying to ignore the light.

"Fucking _Beloi _is your roommate?," she asked incredulously.

"Yeah, he's my best mate," Mal said confusedly.

Vaz sat up carefully and Mal watched Naomi do the same, her superior eyes quickly adjusting to the sudden light.

"DeLeon? The hell are you doing in my house?," asked Vaz, clearly still waking up.

"You two know each other?," said Mal incredulously.

"Know each other? You could say that," she said her arms crossed.

Mal was a little slow on the uptake as he was relatively drunk.

"Ah fucking shit, please tell me you guys weren't fuck buddies, _please, please _I'm begging you," he said, putting his hand on his face dramatically.

Naomi started laughing. Not just the usual reserved chuckle she had here and there but actual genuine laughter.

"Why? Why is it that every fucking time you get the hot chick? Every single time. Sure, I get around more than you but I've never met such a grumpy asshole who gets so much nice ass."

Mal sighed.

"Whatever, Naomi, how are you? Sorry I woke you up," he sat down and cracked a beer despite already being pretty buzzed.

"I was sleeping very well until you came home, so I'm a little pissy but I'll make it."

"Don't you only need like two hours of sleep or some ridiculous shit like that?," he asked, kicking his feet up and ignoring how Sincera was awkwardly standing in the living room.

Naomi rolled her eyes.

"I'm a Spartan, not a zombie. Sure I theoretically _can _stay awake for forty-eight hours but so can you, I used to take a stim the second I could get my hands on one," she ran a hand through her hair and stretched her arms over her head. "What time is it?"

"Like 0030," said Vaz, checking his watch.

"Since Vaz and I are awake already and you guys don't seem to be rushing to go take each others clothes off, can I get you a drink?," she glanced over at Sincera as kindly as she could muster.

There it was. The peace offering.

"Sure," she said awkwardly, moving to sit down in a chair she'd

pulled up. Naomi got up to go get the other female a drink.

They sat awkwardly while they listened to Naomi mix something together.

"She seems really nice," Sincera said, propping her feet up.

"Naomi? Naomi is the _best,_" said Mal, "she's like a little sister to me," he said.

Vaz rolled his eyes. "Naomi is years older than you Mal."

"Well yeah but she doesn't look it and she doesn't act like it, you know what I mean. Naomi is the only person I know who can crush a hinge-head skull with her bare fucking hands then turn around and ask something like 'Mal, what's a boot?'"

They all laughed. Naomi came back and handed a drink to Sincera and sat down.

"Have you really seen her crush a split-lip's head with her bare hands?," Sincera asked Mal.

"Nah, but I've seen her curb stomp one pretty bad and it was hilarious, Naomi, could you crush a hinge-head skull with your bare hands?"

She thought about it for a second.

"I'm not one hundred percent sure, but I think I could. Elites have denser bones than humans do but I think if I was given the proper momentum I'd be able to do it. In armor, absolutely, no problem, no harder than squeezing an orange, though it wouldn't be the most efficient way to kill one. If I was that close I'd probably beat the shit out of them with my weapon, those Brute weapons are particularly formidable with the blades on the end."

"That is so fucking metal," said Sincera, her eyes wide with what was clearly awe. "I'm useless with those Brute weapons, they're too heavy to be practical."

Mal laughed. "I've seen Naomi rip a damn turret off the ground and carry it around killing shit, it's the coolest fucking thing I've ever seen."

Naomi smiled bashfully. She knew that Mal and Vaz admired her in combat and frankly she deserved their admiration, she was capable of things they could hardly comprehend, but it still made her feel good.

"Naomi is the best Spartan ever, seriously all the rest just wanna be Naomi," said Mal seriously.

Naomi scoffed. "I don't think you could say anything farther from the truth." She felt a little mediocre by Spartan standards. She wasn't the fastest, strongest, smartest or even most charismatic. She was just Naomi which usually accomplished the mission but was less than legendary, which for a Spartan was considered mediocre, anything that fell into the realm of reality was lackluster for a Spartan.

"Nah, it's true, you're our girl, you Dev and the Admiral."

Sincera's eyes widened a bit, putting the pieces together.

"You guys were assigned together, all three of you when you were doing your ONI spook bullshit!"

Vaz glared at Mal.

"Fuck," he sighed taking a drink of his beer.

"Our assignment together isn't the classified information, it's just what we were doing, where and why," said Naomi.

"I was wondering how the hell you two had met. You look different than other Spartans I've seen though," she said looking Naomi up and down.

Naomi was quiet. "I am different from other Spartans you've met. I'm one of the originals."

Silence.

"Holy _shit_, like the Master Chief and all that?"

"Fuck yeah, Vaz has _met the fucking Master Chief_, shook his hand and everything," said Mal seriously.

Sincera looked once again like her eyes were going to pop out of her head.

"You mean he's not just some propaganda thing made up to keep people from blasting themselves in the face when all their friends are dead and they're probably gonna die too!? I thought he was like fucking Santa Claus or something, just with more death and destruction!"

Naomi started laughing. She had had no idea that people thought he was made up.

"Yeah he's real, has a wife and kid now," said Vaz flippantly.

Sincera laid back in her chair. She clearly couldn't believe it.

"Just...holy shit man, what's he like?," she asked.

Vaz shrugged.

"I only talked to him for a few minutes. He's surprisingly normal besides being almost seven feet tall."

Sincera looked to Naomi. "He's not bullshitting, right? Because I can't even count how many Marines I've met who said they 'totally served with the Master Chief at the battle of your mother's chest hair.'"

"He's not lying, he's met John," she said quietly.

"Are you guys like, _friends_?" She couldn't stop asking questions, especially as her buzz started to wear off.

Naomi shrugged. "We are friends through shared experience but he's closer with his female squadmate and her husband, they live close together and raise their children together."

"Is his wife a Spartan?"

Naomi shook her head. "No, she's this crazy smart astrophysical engineer, I've never met her but she's supposed to be really something else."

"I can only imagine," she said dryly. "So you met Vaz being a spook, that's nuts," she shook her head.

Naomi shrugged. "Plenty of people meet in the military."

Sincera shrugged.

"I'm tired," said Vaz getting up. He grabbed Naomi's hand and they walked over to his room to go to sleep.

"Don't let him get handsy Naomi!," hollered Mal. Naomi rolled her eyes but couldn't help but smile to herself.

That left Mal and Sincera staring at each other a little awkwardly.

"So, uh, nice place you've got," she said awkwardly.

Mal laughed.

"Look if you don't wanna sleep with me cos I'm Vaz's best friend that's fine."

She arched an eyebrow.

"Oh _I _don't have a problem with that, I was under the impression that you were bothered with the fact that I slept with him."

"I mean, wasn't that like four years ago?"

"Six actually," she said lightly.

There was a beat of silence.

"Eh, fuck it," said Mal. He grabbed her and kissed her. She reciprocated quickly and just as intensely as he would've expected from any female ODST, they definitely had a reputation and it was one Mal definitely enjoyed.

"You can stay the night if you don't wanna spend the money on a cab," said Mal lightly as she was putting on her underwear that had been quickly cast aside.

"Really?"

"Yeah, if ya want," he said, pulling on his boxers.

She shrugged and laid back down on his bed.

"So that was nice," she said, stretching her arms over her head.

"Nice? I'm offended," he scoffed.

"You're definitely a good lay but there's always room for improvement," she said.

He chuckled.

"I guess we'll have to work on that," he said.

"Friends with benefits?," she extended a hand sarcastically.

"Indeed," he replied, shaking her hand.

"Good, I'm gonna need it with the fucking morons I have for troops and the asshole who's my first sergeant," she grumbled.

"As pathetic as it is I get lonely, this is the first night Vaz has stayed the night in weeks even though he still pays his rent."

"Aww, poor Mal, bet you cry yourself to sleep at night."

He jokingly sniffled.

"Beloi seems like he really likes her," she said after a beat of silence.

Mal scoffed.

"Likes her isn't even the half of it, you have no idea. I've seen Vaz into girls before and it was nothing like this whole Naomi thing has been. He has got it bad, totally mad, head over feet in love with 'er."

"Damn," she said, propping herself up on her pillow, "is she like a freak in the sheets or something?"

Mal laughed.

"God she's like my sister I don't want to think about it, but I'm pretty sure that's a big negative."

"Couldn't she like, accidentally snap his neck or something?"

"I mean, if she fucked like you do then yeah," she smacked him on the arm, "but I highly doubt that's the case. She's got like, mega issues."

"I mean, don't we all?," she said flippantly. Thirty years of war wasn't really good for mental health of society as a whole.

Mal shook his head.

"Nah, I'm serious. I can't go into any real detail but like, imagine

the worst possible thing that has ever happened to you in your entire life, multiply that by the number of stars in the galaxy and that still wouldn't be a _fraction _of the shit that that woman has gone through."

Sincera felt a little bit shocked. ODSRs had a pretty raw deal a lot of the time, so for him to speak so firmly about the alleged horror that was the quiet blonde woman's life was quite telling.

"Yeah well I wanna sleep," she said flicking off the light and turning on her side.

Vaz was in his room on _Port Stanley._

I should probably clean my gear.

He still wasn't used to how sedentary ship life was, so he thought about PT he probably should do. The Admiral was always running around the track and she was _fast._

He heard footsteps and someone knocking on his door.

It was Naomi, only she was out of her armor and just in the tight black biosuit that went underneath.

"Oh, hey Naomi," he said lightly, sitting down again and going back to his rifle.

"Corporal," she acknowledged.

"What are we up to?"

He watched her sit down, her knees wide and her back hunched over casually, a mannerism he'd very seldom seen from her.

"Doesn't seem like much, Admiral is talking with BB about something private, Mal is taking care of Adj and Leaks, Dev is running some checks on _Tarte Carte_ and Phyllis is studying up on some hinge head stuff," she shrugged.

"So what're you up to?"

"I was hoping you would be able to help me get out of this suit," she said standing up.

"Uh, what?," he sputtered. Something about her turned him into a fumbling mess. He tried to ignore it but she was the sexiest woman he'd ever met, even if she had absolutely no clue. It was even worse that she didn't know, she had no sense of modesty with how she strutted about in her biosuit and leaned over the platform on the bridge while looking at data from the Admiral. She clearly had no idea what kind of reaction she could illicit from pretty much any hot-blooded male. That ignorance made her even _more _attractive to him. The way she never even tried to grab his attention made her all the more desirable, which made him feel guilty because she was perhaps the most innocent person he'd ever met, probably never even kissed anyone before.

"Something on it is malfunctioning so I can't get it to automatically peel off like it should, I was going to go to the Huragoks but I

don't think I can trust them to not get distracted and just tear the thing apart with me in it," she turned around and he saw the sleek yet slightly complex looking suit's access points, "if you just put your thumb right here," she reached awkwardly to the point she was talking about, "you should be able to manually pry it off of me."

"Oh, sure," he said, setting his rifle aside and standing up behind her.

From this angle, he realized exactly how little the biosuit left to the imagination. It highlighted everything amazingly well. He could tell she was cut as hell but she had what he would frankly describe as a perfect ass.

Stop being a perv.

He peeled away the suit with a surprising amount of difficulty, it was like the material had somehow been made stiff.

"Why is it like this?" he asked, trying to gently handle the expensive garment.

"I think when I was finished with those Brutes BB left my interface improperly and caused the crystal network to seize up to prevent damage to the suit's matrix and structural integrity. It's easily the most expensive part of the Mjolnir system," she shifted trying to help him take off the now stiff suit that should have felt like a normal piece of clothing.

As he peeled it away, her smooth, pale skin became more visible. When he reached her waist and accidentally grazed his fingers on her skin he felt goosebumps up his arms.

_Her skin is so soft. _

He couldn't help but notice small details, like the grouping of freckles underneath her left shoulder blade or a bullet exit wound on her lower right that looked like it was older than he was.

This is a human weapon, highly unlikely she got it fighting the Covenant, probably got it when she was a teenager.

"I can take it from here," she said, carefully slipping her arms out of the sleeves and bending over to take it gently off of her long legs. Of course that specific movement provided him with an amazing view of her backside.

He watched her with uncontrolled curiosity. She moved with such fluidity, even doing something simple like bending over and stepping out of the suit looked _graceful _and even _beautiful_. It reminded him of the Russian ballerinas his grandmother had taken him to see when he was a little boy. He remembered how they pointed their toes and twirled across the stage. With her toes carefully pointed to take them out of the tightly fitted suit the resemblance to a ballerina was even more striking to him.

He could see her back muscles ripple as she slowly drew herself to her full height and carefully folded the suit. His gaze lingered up her waist, to her shoulders and along slender arms.

She's not really wearing much of anything.

Aside from a flimsy flesh-toned undergarment that was clearly made to go with the biosuit and armor, she was completely naked.

She turned around and faced him revealing the entire expanse of her toned stomach and small but shapely breasts. He tried to avert his eyes but he simply couldn't.

"Vaz?," she asked, noticing his strange expression but clearly unbothered by the situation.

He looked at her completely slack-jawed. From her strong, lean legs and the surprisingly delicate curve of her waist, he had never seen a more flawless looking person. She had less scars than he would've imagined. The ones that looked the most brutal were, ironically enough, ones that he knew were left over from the surgeries she had had as a teenager. Her skin was extremely pale. He assumed that it never really saw the sun and the thought made him feel saddened. Sure, being an ODS'T he didn't very often see sun either, especially now on this assignment but he knew that she had probably never laid on the beach in a swimsuit or run outside in a t-shirt for years.

The fluorescent lights threw the dips and shadows her muscles made on her body into sharp relief. He felt like he could look at her forever and still never see enough. She was clearly a more perfect human than he could ever hope to be, the only thing he could feel, aside from torrential arousal, was quite honestly awe. She had all the delicacy and sophistication of a painting but the definition and strength of any olympian.

"Do male and female ODS'Ts not change together?," she asked him, crossing her arms in front of herself suddenly self-conscious.

"They do I just wasn't expecting you to...I just...um," he continued to stutter incoherently, but he still couldn't manage to drag his eyes away.

Then something changed. She got this strangely seductive looking expression on her face that seemed completely wrong and lowered her arms, her breasts bouncing slightly as she did so.

"Oh, so I'm just the prettiest thing you've seen in a while," she said in perfect Russian.

The fuck? Since when does Naomi speak Russian?

She walked closer to him, swaying her hips as she did so, and put her hands on his shoulders and smoothed them down his arms slowly, her fingertips creating what he could only perceive as electricity on his skin until she reached his hand and put in on her breast. Suddenly the how and why of how she spoke Russian didn't matter anymore.

He felt his breathing come quickly and he swallowed nervously.

She sat him down on the edge of his bed and straddled his lap. She pressed her chest against his. He squeezed the breast in his hand and she sighed breathily as she pulled her hair out of its sock bun and

threw it on the ground, shaking her hair. He was overwhelmed by the smell of her and the smooth feel of her skin beneath his fingertips. She leaned in and kissed him, biting his bottom lip and wrapping her arms around him while simultaneously grinding her hips against his in a motion that was essentially everything he wanted out of life.

_Holy fucking shit. _

He didn't know how or even why this was all happening but he wasn't one to question a miracle.

She pulled away from him and looked at him with heavily lidded eyes.

"Vasily!," she yelled suddenly.

Why is she yelling at me?

"Vasily wake up!"

Vaz opened his eyes, the lamp was on and he had the most uncomfortable hard-on he'd had in a long while.

Part of that dream had happened in real life, the whole part about helping her get her suit off but seductress Naomi was definitely something he had fashioned himself.

"Your First Sergeant is on the phone," she said handing him the device.

He immediately felt a rush of fear. Even as a Staff Sergeant he was afraid of the First Sergeant.

"First Sergeant," he said into the phone.

"One of your fucking boots got hauled in for an underage drinking at a strip club, get your ass down here and discipline your platoon five minutes ago!"

The line cut out.

_First Sergeant calling in the middle of the night is a great boner killer. _

"Fucking hell," said Vaz, jumping out of bed and putting on his PT uniform as quickly as he could.

Naomi started getting herself dressed too.

"What're you getting yourself dressed for?," he asked, tying his shoes.

"Don't I deserve to mete out a little punishment as well? I just got woke up because you have a Marine who's an idiot."

"I fucking love you," he said simply. She chuckled.

"Let's go beat some asses," she said, dressing herself in one of her old Navy t-shirts.

When he stormed into the barracks, he put on his best angry NCO face he could possibly muster. He took a lot of pride in how terrifying he could look even without trying.

Naomi watched him storm through the hallways, banging on doors yelling variations on, "WAKE THE FUCK UP FUCKTARDS," and "GET YOUR ASSES IN PT GEAR AND ON THE DRILL PAD YESTERDAY."

Naomi watched the disoriented and tired ODSs sprint down the stairs, some of them with more grace than others.

When Vaz had herded them all outside, he stood there and looked at all of them.

"_One _of you decided it was a good idea to drink underage and get caught," he growled.

Naomi couldn't believe how scary he actually sounded. Something about his accent made him sound slightly incoherent when he was shouting but she thought it was a good effect.

"This," he pointed at Naomi, "Is my girlfriend. As you can see, my girlfriend is hot as hell and I was tucked in bed with her."

Naomi had to hold back laughter and fight the blush creeping up her neck in front of the young ODSs.

_Wow, I've been a civilian a long time if I actually have to work at keeping my military bearing. _

"As you can imagine, on a list of things I wanted to do this evening, the absolute _last fucking thing on that list _was to get a phone call from the First Sergeant telling me that one of you fucked up."

The ODSs stood completely still in formation, waiting for him to continue.

"I don't give a Brute's hairy ballsack which one of you it was, you can deal with the First Sergeant and the LT tomorrow. Tonight, you are _all _going to pay and you're not getting off easy. Since you've managed to piss off my girlfriend who normally has the temperament of Saint, I'm gonna let her decide how you're going to learn discipline and accountability for each other this fine evening. If you guys aren't as stupid as you look, I'm sure you've gathered she's a damn Spartan so God have mercy on your pathetic boot asses," he said, looking over at Naomi.

She glanced over at him a little anxiously. She hadn't lead group PT since before her augmentation procedures when she was 14. It just wasn't something done among Spartans, especially during organized warfare. They were usually so separated that they would just do PT by themselves. When they were together, they were too busy fighting a war to do group exercise like they had when they were young.

She looked at the platoon. They stood straight and disciplined despite their transgression earlier in the evening. Even though only one of them had messed up, the entire platoon would learn together because that's just how the military worked. She knew that they

weren't bad troops really, but that wasn't an excuse. She thought of the gravelly sounding First Sergeant who had yelled so loudly through the phone that Naomi heard every word and the ass-chewing that Vaz would no doubt receive from him on Monday.

She made sure to speak loudly enough that they all could hear her when she asked Vaz: "Do you want them to be able to walk by Monday or not?"

"I don't want them to walk straight for a _week,_ " he said, crossing his arms, "it's not like these sad excuses for Helljumpers have a war to fight, so they've been left with entirely too much freetime."

She nodded.

"Well, first of all, I'm not a Marine, and I've never been apart of this 'Spartan' branch that's all new, I'm a Navy woman through and through. I don't yell, so listen up. Until Staff Sergeant Beloi or myself says otherwise, you will not refer to yourself as an ODST, Marine, or any other member of the UNSC. You are all just a bunch of people in uniforms, because there is no way in hell any group of Helljumpers I served with would ever let one of their own _get caught _underage drinking. You all should've done everything you could to cover for your brother or your sister," she cracked her knuckles.

"So think about that in the coming hours," she glanced over at Vaz, "I hope you plan on doing this with them, you're their leader."

He knew she was right. He also knew he would regret it later, but he nodded regardless.

She started out with stretches. She didn't want them to get injured.

She ran them through every exercise she could think of.

She hadn't tired them out yet, but she would.

"Okay, let's run," she said more to herself.

She didn't call cadence. Not only did she know it drove Vaz nuts, she didn't feel like they deserved to feel like ODSTs at this point.

She wasn't tired at all, she was running at was a very moderate and comfortable pace, but she knew that was probably the fastest these guys could run at an endurance distance. Some of the ones that were still drunk fell out and vomited all over but, to their credit at least they fell back in as she ran them around the station.

She halted them when Vaz looked like he was about to throw up himself. She didn't want to embarrass him.

"Everyone on your faces, sound off!," she hollered, dropping down into a pushup position. This time she decided to call cadence so that they did push-ups all in time.

She made them push the ground for a long time. Eventually she got bored and started alternating arms, doing her push ups single handed.

"I'm just warming up, I hope none of you are getting tired," she said nonchalantly. She glanced over at Vaz who looked like he was still doing okay. She glanced up and saw that some of the ODS'Ts arms were starting to shake and give out.

"On your backs, kick," she said quickly.

Afterwards, she made them drag themselves through sand pit and do leg lunges holding ammunition cans in each arm. Their legs shook with exertion and their faces turned bright red. She made sure to grab triple what they were carrying when she did the lunges with them.

When they looked like they were on the verge of passing out, she made them form up.

"Are you ready to be Marines?," she hollered loudly at them.

They yelled back a resounding "Yes ma'am!"

"Alright, let's go," she shouted, this time calling cadence.

Let's see if I can remind them what they are and what that means.

They covered a few miles and she took them back to their barracks toward the track and parking lot.

As the sun came up over the horizon, she saw a modest car pull up and what she was sure was Vaz's Gunny Sergeant get out of his car and the First Sergeant along with him.

He heard shouting, shouting _far _more enthusiastic and motivated than he was accustomed to on a Saturday morning.

"What are they yelling?," he asked to the Gunnery Sergeant.

He looked over and saw the platoon being lead by an extremely tall blonde woman, calling a cadence he'd never heard before.

"Ho-lee shit," the First Sergeant murmured, completely in awe of what he was seeing.

She slowed them from a run, then halted them right in front of the Gunny and First Sergeant.

Vaz walked to the higher ranking NCOs and stood at parade rest.

They didn't really have any words. Naomi wiped some sweat off her brow and walked over to stand by Vaz as he awaited an assessment.

She watched the two higher ranking men look her over from head to toe.

"Naomi Sentzke," she extended her hand and shook with them firmly, they both still looked a little flabbergasted.

"This is my girlfriend, she was pissed off when we got woke up so she

took it upon herself to help me beat the shit out of them," said Vaz, glancing over at his platoon.

"I'll be damned, you're not just tall, right?," asked the Gunny Sergeant.

Naomi smiled.

"I am a Spartan, if that's what you're asking. Retired though."

The First Sergeant looked over her shoulder.

"Platoon, fall out," he shouted.

The ODS'Ts hobbled away, clearly unable to hold it together much longer after the grueling three hours they had endured on a Saturday.

"How the hell did an ODS'T and a Spartan end up together?," he asked when the ODS'Ts had all disappeared. ODS'Ts and Spartans didn't really have a track-record of getting along.

"We met on my last tour," he said simply. "Saw her kill five Brutes in about two minutes and knew she was the only girl for me," he joked, glancing over at her.

"Rah," said Naomi sarcastically. She shuffled her feet and laughed nervously. Meeting new people made her feel awkward.

"Good work Sergeant Beloi, she's welcome anytime, even when they don't fuck up royally, they don't look like they'll walk straight for a week," laughed the First Sergeant, walking away with the other NCO.

Vaz sighed.

"I don't think I've ever heard either of them laugh, I think the world is going to end," he said gravely. Naomi smiled.

"Can we go home? Maybe you could carry me?," he joked. He also was very clearly exhausted, walking awkwardly from the soreness kicking in.

"We'll put you in a bath, I'll rub your legs, we gotta get you in shape to go to that cookout with John, Fred and Kelly tonight," she smiled.

"That's probably the hottest thing you've ever said to me," he joked, "not the cookout thing, the bath and rubbing my legs." She laughed and kissed him on the cheek.

She was an _amazing _woman. Things weren't always easy and their relationship wasn't exactly normal, but that's what made it extraordinary.

I am so damn lucky.

* * *

><p>Yay Vaz Naomi love makes my heart happy. Like, they're my fav. I

hope you guys enjoyed this chapter as much as I do. Your reviews are everything to me, thank you so much to those of you that review! :D :D :D

32. Chapter 32

I have had the most DIFFICULT time posting this chapter. I have NO idea why. The next chapters might like, end abruptly and stuff because honestly the next leg of the story I wrote like, 30,000 words in one sitting and I just can't figure out good ways to break it up. Sorry. Lol. Sorry I'm kinda late, had a death in the family going to funeral Thursday and Friday which is just...yeah, also pretty sure I'm gonna die because I've watched too many powerpoints on how not to get drunk and harass civilians. Ugh.

Please check out my other story! I will be updating it soon!

* * *

><p>Naomi moved chairs and a few benches around the firepit she and Vaz had constructed yesterday.<p>

It's finally happening, this seems so idyllic and strange but John, Kelly and Fred are coming her for food and camping with their families, she stood and looked at her work with the chairs.

That one is a few degrees off. It wasn't evenly spaced with the other chairs and it bothered her.

"What are you doing?" Vaz smiled a little at the frown on her face.

"Chair isn't evenly spaced," she grumbled as she moved the chair what must have not even been an inch.

"I can't tell," Vaz deadpanned.

"Well I can and it'll bother me. It'd bother Serin too, she hates crap like that," she said glancing at the now evenly spaced chairs.

"What time is everyone coming over again?"

"Dev and Phyllis should be here any minute, they wanna catch up without everyone here. Everyone else is getting here in about an hour, though I guarantee Mal will be late," said Serin as she came out into the backyard.

It was a beautiful day, they couldn't have asked for anything more pleasant. Serin started to warm up the grill that she'd never used before.

"Do you think any of them know how to grill? Can't be that hard, right?" she asked a little apprehensive.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," said Naomi. She knew that it was more than that and that Serin was also pretty anxious about this gathering. It was exciting but still exceedingly strange.

Naomi smiled when Dev and Phillips arrived. They seemed happy. Phillips had gotten tenure and Dev had chosen to get out of the military so she could pursue her other interests, though Naomi wasn't quite sure what they were. She also was recently pregnant, which was exciting for the both of them and a little strangeâ€"no one really wanted to imagine Dev and Phillips going at it, as immature as that was. She assumed that they would get married eventually. She was happy for them.

Dev smiled big at her and hugged her. Naomi felt stiff for a split second but relaxed and hugged her back.

They laughed and talked for a while, catching up until conversation stalled.

"Okay, so Lian isn't going to say anything but I'll be the one to askâ€"how weird is this whole soiree gonna get?"

Dev glared and hit him on the arm. "Evan that's so fucking rude."

Serin cursed loudly and slammed the grill shut, dusting off her hands and wiping the sweat from her brow.

"Not gonna lie Evan, this is gonna get sci-fi government conspiracy weird because that's essentially what this whole thing is. So hang on and try not to wet yourself when you see John."

Naomi smirked a little.

"I don't know whether I should be fangirling because I had a Master Chief action figure or if I should be terrified," mused Devereux.

"I'm sure either would make him equally uncomfortable," said Naomi calmly.

"What's he like, I need some mental prep, he's a legend, I've never met a legend," she said, settling into her chair a little more.

Naomi thought for a moment.

"I don't know, he's John, that's really the only way I can describe him," she said quietly.

"What about you Admiral, you got anything?"

She shrugged. "I mean, he's the savior of the human race and the entire galaxy. He also sucked his thumb as a kid and is a 6'10, freckled ginger. He puts his pants on one leg at a time just like the rest of us."

They all heard a car pull up.

"I told them to just come around to the back," said Serin a little needlessly.

Vaz felt like he was holding his breath and didn't really know why.

The wooden gate opened and immediately a little girl sprinted into the backyard towards the Admiral.

"AHHHH!" she was screeching as she jumped onto Serin's lap with a thud, wrapping her arms around her neck.

"My dad got me candy!" she yelled loudly.

All of them looked at the four adults arriving, three of them extremely tall and one average height.

The tallest of them pinched his brow and sighed, his shoulders moving as he did so.

"No, Joan, I did not get you candy, you snuck it into the shopping cart," he said, clearly exasperated.

"I still don't know how that happened, how can you not notice that?" said the shorter woman with her hands on her hips. She rolled her eyes and walked over to them.

"You called me while I was paying and started ranting about your department head to me," he replied.

"You never were good at multi-tasking," she trailed off and directed her attention towards the group of people.

"Naomi!" exclaimed the taller woman. She ran to her at a very strangely quick pace for such a short distance and hugged her tightly. Naomi was surprised when Kelly picked her up off the ground and she started to laugh.

Kelly set her down and put her hand on her shoulder.

"I can't even tell you how wonderful it is to see you again," Kelly's smile lit up her entire face and it made her even more beautiful—"her eyes were bright and Naomi couldn't help but feel that she was almost too happy, too normal looking.

"It's great to see you too," said Naomi in her normally softspoken fashion.

"And Serin, Joan has beat me to it," she gestured at the Admiral.

"Oh I think I'm feeling enough love as it is," said Serin a little uncomfortably with the three year old hanging on her.

"I'm sorry, do you want me to grab her?" the shorter woman walked over to her and Serin couldn't help but flinch at her, even if it was for a split second.

"No it's fine," she said quickly.

She smiled. "I'm Cortana, we haven't met but as you can imagine I've heard of you."

Cortana turned to Naomi, who was being hugged by Fred.

"And _this, _is John's other woman, isn't that right sweetheart?" she said pointedly at her husband. The onlookers, that being the non-spartan members of Kilo-5, watched him _roll _his eyes.

Naomi flushed bright red.

"Christ I'm so sorry about that, you think someone is competent at their job and then that kind of thing happens. If it's any consolation I had the guy responsible put on administrative leave without pay for a month and put the fear of God in him, nearly pissed himself by the time I was done with him," said Serin, standing up with Joan still clinging to her.

She extended her hand to the shorter woman and shook her hand.

"Serin Osman, it's nice to finally meet you, Cortana."

"So my reputation precedes me," she said winking playfully.

"Does that surprise you?"

"No, I suppose not," she said lightly.

John walked up to the two of them, seemingly ignoring the other people there.

"Joan has been talking about the 'Admiral lady,' since we told her a week or so ago that we were going to be coming here, you obviously made an impression.

"Where are your Admrals clothes?" she asked, frowning and tugging at her t-shirt.

"They're not very comfortable so I don't wear them at my house."

"My dad likes to sit in his underwear when he's at home."

Cortana started laughing loudly, along with Kelly and Fred while John simply sighed.

"You're just _trying _to make Daddy embarrassed today aren't you sweetie," said Cortana pinching her daughter's cheek while she giggled madly.

"It's okay, I like a good lay in my drawers on a day off."

Naomi looked over to see Mal sauntering in. He walked straight up to her and reached up on his tiptoes and kissed her loudly on the cheek.

"Hey gorgeous," he said.

"Disgusting, now I have to go disinfect myself," she groaned wiping her cheek with the back of her hand.

"I see how it is Mal," said Phillips standing up, sighing. Mal proceeded to go plant a big kiss on his cheek, making Devereux, Osman, Vaz and Naomi start laughing and Kelly, Fred, John and Cortana look on a little awkwardly.

"I know you missed me Phyllis, you off having fun being a super nerd? And Dev you look huge already."

"It's no wonder you don't have a gal Mal, you're not really getting yourself any points."

"If you had said that to me while I was pregnant, I would've kicked your ass," Cortana said.

Mal looked over at her and Cortana watched his expression change to one of disgust though he quickly replaced it with a smile.

_Interesting, _she thought to herself. _First the Admiral now this one._

"Cortana," she said, extending her hand, ignoring his facial expression.

"Mal," he said a little stiffly.

Vaz walked over to John and extended his hand.

"Good to see you again, sir," he said lowly.

"Call me John, please. Nice to see you too, how are things?" he asked. Vaz knew he was mostly asking about Naomi. Somehow he had a way of communicating quite a lot with very few words.

"Things are good," he said simply.

"Glad to hear it."

Kelly and Fred introduced themselves to the rest of Kilo-5, receiving some strange looks but ignoring them completely. It just seemed strange how personable they were—they were very different from Naomi and even the Admiral, they had a difficult time understanding it.

"Dad, may I get down please?"

Fred was holding another little girl with curly, dark brown hair.

"This is me and Kelly's daughter Samantha, Sam wanna say hi to everyone?"

The little girl looked at the crowd warily and shook her head 'no.' Fred chuckled.

"Okay, go play with your cousin," he said setting her down.

Joan looked over at Sam and whispered in the Admiral's ear.

Serin started to laugh.

"No, you can't put on my uniform but you can go play with the jump ropes and game court we talked about last time we were together, remember?"

"Did you get those just for us?"

"Yep, I knew you were coming and that you thought it'd be fun," she replied.

Joan gave the Admiral a big kiss on the cheek and hopped off her lap.

"Come on Sammy, we have games to play!" she exclaimed.

Cortana smiled warmly as she watched them run off to play.

"Thank you so much for doing that, you didn't need to buy entertainment just for them," she said.

"Eh, I rented the stuff for a few days, bought a few layouts for my workout pad, you can buy hopscotch for cheap. Figured it's best if they had something to keep them occupied," she said.

"I have beer and food should be done soon," Serin said.

John got up with an eagerness that was a little surreal to think aboutâ€“practically everything he did seemed surreal.

"My kind of guy, Naomi you still drink those wine coolers?" Mal got up walking towards the cooler.

"I got it," said John reaching into the cooler.

Kelly smiled when John passed her her favorite kind of beer.

"You remember what I like," she smiled.

He looked over at her as if to say "of course."

Dinner was quickly done and everyone started to eat. Everyone made somewhat awkward small talk but it was surprisingly pleasant. The sun started to set and Serin added some more wood to the fire.

Cortana was laughing loudly at something Devereux had said when Mal whispered to Vaz and Naomi, "Is it just me or does she look _exactly _like you'd imagine a young Halsey looking?"

Conversation quickly screeched to a halt and Mal thought he was going to piss his pants when John looked directly at him. He wasn't glaring but his eye contact was extremely unnerving.

Cortana crossed her arms and straightened up in her chair and looked at him. Vaz sighed.

Leave it to Mal to say something clearly offensive before the evening is out, he thought to himself.

"Hey, Helljumper," she said, her voice high pitched and sarcastic sounding.

"You're not a very good whisperer," she whispered loudly, raising her eyebrows and smiling at him fakely. She dropped the smile and rolled her eyes, then cleared her throat loudly and kept talking to Devereux

as if nothing had happened.

Vaz and Serin glared at Mal while he chuckled awkwardly, shrugging his shoulders.

"Very observant Mal, you never fail to impress me," said Naomi, finishing her wine cooler.

"Dang Naomi I didn't know you drank so fast," he said.

"Vaz is rubbing off on me," she said, she moved to go get another drink when Vaz passed her her drink of choice.

Naomi smiled softly and popped the cap off with her thumb.

"Aww, look at you two, you're so precious," Mal cooed sarcastically as he puckered his lips making kissing sounds. Naomi rolled her eyes.

"Makes me feel lonely," he sighed dramatically.

"Maybe if you weren't such a jackass you wouldn't strike out with the ladies so bad," said Serin.

"You know, I'm thinking about it and Dev and Phyllis have each other, now Vaz and Naomi, you and I are the only part of Kilo-5 that hasn't paired off, maybe we're meant to be," he said winking at her.

"If I were still a Chief and I heard anyone talk to an Admiral that way I'd have corrected them," the way he said corrected made it sound more like beat the shit out of them or publically humiliated them.

Serin sighed, "It's okay John, Mal can't help that he's a blundering idiot. We're also not so formal in ONI, we prefer to handle things in house, isn't that right guys?"

She quick punched Mal on the arm. Mal bit his lower lip until he clearly couldn't hold it back.

"Holy shit you are packing some serious heat, fuck," he rubbed at his arm sorely. "Shit what do you bench?"

She laughed. "You know, I really love how you guys forget that I'm a Spartan reject, it makes me feel great to take you by surprise like that."

"Naomi would never punch me like that," Mal pouted.

"That's because if I did I'd knock you into next week, I don't have as much restraint as Serin," said Naomi.

Kelly started laughing.

"What's so funny?" asked Naomi.

"You, you're just entertaining that's all," she said smiling.

John looked over at the arm that the Admiral had punched the mouthy ODSF with. She had the usual surgical scarring up her arms along with

some more vicious looking patchwork type scars that he could only assume were from the frantic attempt to save her life after the augmentation procedures had failed her. On her right forearm was what looked like a black Roman numeral and a saber with some words underneath.

"What's on your arm?"

Serin looked down at her arm, laughed and looked over at Mal and Vaz who started laughing.

"We all got a tattoo when we took the Admiral out and got her shitfaced before she took over ONI, she's too important to tear up the town with us now but I think we made up for it that night," said Mal, pulling up his shirt showing his matching tattoo on his pectoral muscle, "Naomi's got one too."

Naomi turned around and pulled her tank top to the side, revealing the same tattoo on her right shoulder blade.

"What's it mean?," asked Cortana, always curious.

"Roman numeral for five because we were Kilo-5, a saber for our status as a combat unit and the words semper fortis, an archaic unofficial motto of the Navy meaning always strong," explained Naomi, "Marines got semper fidelis, even though they felt like it was a little cliché," she added.

"Yeah, despite the fact that it's disgustingly moto and pretty boot of us it's a pretty great motto," said Devereux, looking at her tattoo on her upper arm.

Mal smiled. "Man, that was a good night, don't remember much after we bought the Admiral a lap dance but it was a good time."

Naomi laughed genuinely. "You don't remember when you and Vaz set a dumpster on fire in that parking lot?"

Vaz scratched his head. "Oh yeah, I think I do remember that. Admiral, didn't you flash a bunch of Air Force pilots out on leave?"

"Stop right there," she said scowling.

Naomi flushed red just thinking about how crazy Serin acted when she was drunk. She definitely understood why it was something she couldn't do anymore-she clearly didn't do moderation because when she was on a mission that woman was six degrees of fucked up.

"God how did I forget about that?! Admiral you are a damn fine looking lady," Mal winked at her and she hit him once again, this time clearly hard enough to leave a bruise.

"Fucking cocky Air Force pilots, think they're hot shit because they've got all the flashy air frames," muttered Devereux, she herself a pilot.

"That was the first time I'd ever actually been drunk," said Naomi, laughing a little.

"Uh, yeah I remember, I held your hair back when you spent all of the next morning throwing up," said Devereux, "if they were trying to make you all the perfect soldier they really should've made it so you don't get hungover, especially if you're gonna roll with Marines," she said snarkily.

John was a little surprised at the ease they seemed to feel with each other. Rank didn't seem to be an issue despite the fact that they had an _Admiral _in their midst. They definitely respected her but it wasn't the same stiff order and discipline he was accustomed to.

_Things really are different in ONI, or at least in Kilo-5. _

He also was slowly realizing that _this _was where Naomi's allegiance was, not with Spartans. He understood on some level-his loyalty was to Cortana but then to the rest of the Spartans. He wondered if she felt isolated or abandoned them or perhaps she felt that her experiences shared with Kilo-5 were somehow stronger.

"So do you have any great pregnancy advice?" asked Devereux to Kelly and Cortana.

"Besides don't get pregnant?" said Cortana sardonically.

Devereux made a subtle disappointed expression and Cortana let up.

"No, I'm kidding, I was just very uncomfortable most of my pregnancy. My best advice is to not feel bad about making your baby's father your slave, I had no trouble with that. John would rub my feet, bring me water, breakfast in bed, you name it he was on it. One time I woke up in the middle of the night craving radishes from our garden and he went outside in the middle of the night to go dig some up. You're entitled to a personal slave, you're growing a life and as far as I'm concerned that's a full time task," she chuckled.

Devereux smiled. "You hear that Evan? Sounds like you gotta step up your game."

"I recommend breastfeeding as long as you can, it really helps you get back in shape after you have the baby," said Kelly.

Cortana scoffed. "Kelly were you ever _out _of shape? What, did you run your mile at the snail's pace of six minutes or something?"

Kelly frowned. "Five thirty at nine months pregnant which is practically walking for me."

"Well, I would suggest taking it easy for quite a bit after you have the baby and uh, don't _check in_ with yourself for a little bit, if you know what I mean. You just don't want to," Cortana shook her head.

"I am never having children," muttered Serin.

"Also, have as much sex and alone time as possible while that thing is still in there, you won't _ever be alone again_ after the baby is out, so enjoy your last few months of freedom," nodded

Cortana.

"That's not true, you're dramatic, Fred and I have watched Joan for you and John," said Kelly.

"Of course but your brain is never really off your kid. It's almost worse when they're at someone else's house. Here's how our first date night after Joan was born went: Drop Joan off at your house, Joan cries and we feel guilty the whole time we drive home. We go out for dinner and John messages you three times asking how Joan is doing, we go home, things start to get a little romantic, John steps on a toy Joan left lay, he of course would have caught himself falling if he hadn't been otherwise engaged, but instead we both fall down and we're on the ground which whatever that's fine but then I realize I haven't brushed my teeth in two days and John has baby spit up on the collar of his shirt and it's all a mess and before we knew it we were driving over to Fred and Kelly's to pick Joan up because we weren't ready to have her spend the night somewhere else," she finished quickly. "Moral of the story: have as much alone time as possible before you have your baby because it will disappear. John and I had our first real date since Joan was born this February, and even that was a bit of a disruption. Lasky and Palmer are great but Joan was completely revved up, they put her to bed way too late and she was a nightmare to deal with the next day so it leaves you wondering if it was really worth it."

John nodded in agreement. "I didn't realize how little people know about children," he looked to Fred and Kelly, "they gave her a bath with my shampoo and she broke out in a rash that didn't go away for a week," he said lowly.

"Maybe she isn't the best babysitter in the world but Sarah Palmer is an amazing woman," said Serin.

"She speaks very highly of you, Serin," said John.

"Does she now?" She leaned forward, interested.

John nodded. "Said you have quite the case of 'resting bitch face' but you are 'the best damn officer she's served with.'"

Serin chuckled.

"I admire her very much. She takes her position very seriously. She and the Captain are also a quite formidable team."

"Lasky?"

Serin nodded. "I was initially worried about their relationship, they're very important people but they have no problem working together. They actually argue a fair amount, but off duty that Captain has got it bad for her, follows her around like a puppy."

John chuckled, he could tell that that was most certainly true.

"They drive separate to work and he leaves breakfast and coffee on her desk every morning like clockwork because she comes in before anything around is open."

Vaz chuckled. "Admiral doesn't miss anything."

She nodded. "As far as I'm concerned, everything is my business."

"I always feel like she avoids me," said Naomi lightly.

"She probably does. From what I've gathered she's intimidated by us," said John.

"I mean, no offense but when Vaz and I first met Naomi we were pretty freaked," said Mal. "It's like meeting someone out of a storybook for us regular folks."

"I think it's more that she feels self conscious. She feels that she needs to..." He trailed off.

"She feels that she needs to fill John's shoes which, as you can imagine is daunting," continued Cortana.

Kelly snorted. "Please, I gave up on that _years _ago."

"Were you just always some kind of...I dunno, Spartan jock?" Joked Mal.

"John you were kind of a jerk when we were little," said Naomi.

"Not to me," said Kelly.

"Well yeah because you and Sam were his team," said Naomi.

"Who was your team?" Asked Fred.

"Arthur-079 and Alice-130."

"What about you Serin?"

"Soren-066 and Jorge-052," she said without hesitation. "We were a rowdy bunch, Soren was a lot like me, wild, defensive and suspicious of people and Jorge didn't speak a word of English, he was plucked right off of Reach."

"You did well though, I remember always trying to beat your squad," said John.

Serin nodded. "I took well to Spartan life as a child, it was actually the most I had ever been taken care of. I had food, a bed and people who talked to me. It was fun for me."

John felt sad thinking of her circumstance. It was sad to think of a child without food or affection like that.

"Mal, what separated me from the other Spartans was first and foremost Cortana and then my ability to keep doing stupid things and not die. Stupid things like detonate a nuke with my bare hands and not die. I always happened to be at the right place at the right time and had constant advice from the most brilliant mind in the galaxy. If one is stubborn to a fault the way I was, sometimes the result happens to be favorable."

"Yeah John I've seen you do some pretty crazy things," commented Fred.

Cortana chuckled. "John has always been crazy, I'm crazy and that's why we were the best team the UNSC ever saw," she rested her hand on his knee and smiled. "Even though we were different he always matched me move for move, from outrunning havoc missiles, crashing banshees and free falling into a Covenant ship with a primed weapon we had some good times and managed to stay alive," she smiled as if she was remembering the most wonderful time of her life. "It's a good thing that I've always liked crazy," she winked.

He looked at her and for a moment he very deeply missed having her inside of his head, having her feel his heart and know his thoughts. He missed how she felt, how she rested at the forefront of his consciousness. It almost felt lonely.

He rested his hand on hers and reminded himself that he could touch her, that he could hold her hand with his. That was invaluable.

Kelly sighed. "You two should write a book, it'd be the most exciting damn thing on the market, not to mention the most romantic."

Cortana rolled her eyes. "Didn't you all know, the Halo Campaign is actually a love story, never mind the explosions and general waves of destruction."

Everyone laughed at that.

"But seriously, you two fell in love during that campaign, am I correct?" Kelly prodded.

"I mean, I suppose," she looked at John. "I've always been devoted to John."

"What if you had picked me? Would we have ran off into the sunset together?" Joked Kelly.

"I think that we probably would have ended up dead doing something ridiculous, we would've had way too much fun," commented Cortana.

Fred laughed. "That was probably a good call on your part."

"I never let an AI in my brain during combat, I found it extremely uncomfortable," commented Naomi.

"But it makes you so much faster, so much stronger, at least twenty percent, once Cortana had me figured out it was even more than that," said John incredulously.

"It's uncomfortable and was too personal for me. I don't like feeling controlled."

John frowned. He had never felt controlled by Cortana, only helped and even protected.

Cortana shrugged. "I understand that, it's a strange relationship. It's also fraught with peril, I think if you have any chemistry what

happened to John and I is somewhat inevitable and almost certainly going to end tragically."

Mal raised a glass "Kilo-5, to BB," they all nodded, raised their glasses and took a drink.

"We had an AI, he was my best friend," said Serin solemnly.

Cortana smiled softly. "What was he like?"

"Sassy. Flamboyant. A know it all. Loyal. Creative, he used to joke about the type of Spartan I would've been, the average perfect soldier or a true 'angel of death,' type," she laughed.

"Hilarious, funniest guy I ever met," commented Mal.

"Saved my ass, stopped me from ending up in prison," said Vaz.

"Helped me cope, always knew what to say," added Naomi.

"Best guy to have when you're trapped in a Sanghelli stronghold," agreed Philips.

"Most ridiculous backseat driver you'll see," Devereux said smiling.

"_Loathed _Catherine Halsey with every part of his existence," murmured Vaz.

Cortana couldn't help but feel her heart skip a beat.

"Did he ever say why?" She asked somewhat meekly.

"He just always did. Later he told me that his donor was a doctor who worked closely on the Spartan-II project. The doctor was so desperately ashamed and grief stricken by what he had helped do to us he killed himself, leaving behind a note that he wanted to be a donor for an AI that would help Spartans. So that's what happened," Serin replied.

Cortana gasped and covered her mouth.

"Wow," muttered Fred.

Serin sighed. "Before I pressed his kill switch he begged me to either kill her or get all of her accreditation in the academic community stripped, neither of which I have done. I'm a pretty shitty best friend, can't even fulfil a dying wish."

"You pressed his kill switch?" Cortana whispered.

She nodded. "He asked me to. Didn't want me to see him suffer, didn't want to go crazy and lose everything he was. He wanted to be able to say goodbye to me properly instead of rambling and arguing."

Cortana felt like crying.

"That's what I would've wanted, I would've wanted John to do it but the UNSC wouldn't have allowed it, would have sent me through

decommissioning."

John shook his head. "I don't think I could've done it."

"Even if it had been what I wanted?"

He shook his head again. "I'm not strong enough for that, not made for things like that."

Everyone stared-the Master Chief talking about his weakness and inability to do anything seemed ridiculous.

"Being Commander of ONI is in many ways a more stressful, tenuous position than being a Spartan. I don't have to rough it in the field or shoot Covenant but the battles I fight are often not clear and the consequences greater than anything you could imagine." She sipped at her drink.

"But it was my destiny, I was meant for this job and I would rather it be me than anyone else. I trust myself because I've been royally fucked by ONI on a very personal level so I'm very reluctant to do that to people. That's why Margaret chose me from the start."

John did not envy her. It sounded harder than he could imagine.

Behind the campfire, they heard piercing wails.

Kelly and John stood out of their chairs so quickly that it surprised Vaz that the chairs didn't fall over.

Don't think I'm ever going to get used to that.

* * *

><p>Have a good week, hope you enjoyed.<p>

33. Chapter 33

Merry Christmas to those celebrating Christmas! I hope it's wonderful for all of you. I'm having a nice time at my in-laws which is really nice. I hope you all enjoy.

* * *

><p>Joan ran over to her dad while Kelly ran to Sam who was the crying child.<p>

"Joan, what happened?" asked John, sitting back down in his chair so he was more on his daughter's eye level.

Joan looked down at her feet and started to fidget.

"We were playing catch and it wasn't my fault!" she exclaimed. She was starting to tear up and get upset.

Kelly was hushing her daughter and brought her back by the fire.

"She wants you," said Kelly passing their sobbing child to her husband.

"It's okay sweetheart," he sat her on his lap and pushed back her hair. "Wow, she's got quite the goose egg forming right here," he said.

Joan started to cry in full force.

"I'm not concerned about whose fault it is, what happened," questioned John.

"Tell Daddy what happened, he won't be angry," assured Cortana.

Joan was hiccuping as she explained that they were playing catch and she threw the ball too hard and fast and that Sam didn't catch it.

"I didn't mean to hurt Sammy," she said whimpering.

"I know you didn't, but you have to be careful when you're playing," said Cortana.

Joan looked at Cortana and said something in a foreign language John didn't understand. She had tears still rolling down her cheeks.

_This again. _He sighed. He was happy Joan was learning a new school but it was exceedingly frustrating.

Cortana spoke back to her in Italian, with something that sounded consoling to him.

"What is she saying?" he grumbled.

"She doesn't understand why when she plays catch with you that you always catch the ball, but Sam doesn't just catch the ball like you," sighed Cortana.

"When did you start teaching her a language?" asked Kelly.

"When she started getting bored and destroying our house in her spare time," John replied sardonically. "Now she is a little more focused on the toys and lessons Cortana got her but we went through a phase where she didn't realize that I couldn't understand her and she'd get frustrated with me and throw a tantrum, sometimes in public and then I'd have to take my screaming child home, discipline her and then she still doesn't understand. She's very obstinate. Now she seems to get that I don't understand her when she talks to me in a foreign language, but now that she realizes that she will say things to annoy me or if she only wants Cortana to understand." He smoothed his hand over his face in a somewhat annoyed fashion.

"I mean, does being a parent really stack up to being a Spartan?" asked Devereux.

"Being a Spartan isn't really hard, especially on the enlisted side. You wait for orders, you fulfill them, you prep for cryo and make sure your training and file is up to date. Being a parent, you're dealing with a tiny human that depends upon you completely and there

are so many mistakes to make, it's amazing how many ways you can shape a person. I've never been one to stay up at night worrying until I became a father, now I worry about things like are her toys picked up, is she being challenged, is she getting enough socialization, how can I schedule her a check up, the list goes on and on," he glanced over at Cortana who was still explaining to Joan why you can't just whip balls at your cousin and expect them to catch it, though he wasn't quite sure if that was exactly what she was saying.

Naomi laughed. "You had a pretty charmed career John, did you ever have to deal with an officer on a power trip who was dumb as a bag of rocks?"

"Yes, Andrew Del Rio tried to have me arrested. As you can imagine I didn't find that agreeable."

"You nearly got arrested? I thought _I _was the ridiculous one," chuckled Vaz.

Serin laughed. "You should be court-martialled, you aren't because I like you."

"Some people are difficult. Sarah Palmer and I have agreed that Andrew Del Rio is the Navy's biggest pogue," sighed John.

Mal and Vaz started laughing. Something about John calling someone a PoG was entertaining.

"Pogues man, what're you gonna do," said Mal while he laughed and took a sip of his drink.

Cortana continued to carry on a conversation with Joan that John couldn't understand until they seemed to reach some sort of conclusion.

"Now I think you should tell Sam you're sorry," said John when he thought they had reached some sort of understanding.

"But I didn't mean to hurt her," Joan insisted.

"I know you didn't mean to hurt her but you still did so you should apologize to her."

Joan crawled off her dad's lap and approached Fred and Sam. Sam had calmed down quite a bit.

"Sam, Joan wants to talk to you," said Kelly.

Sam looked at her adopted cousin warily and frowned, still crying.

"You hit me with that ball, it really hurt" she cried.

Fred put her down so she was standing with Joan.

"I know, I'm really sorry," said Joan quietly crying again.

Sam wiped at her eyes. Then she went and hugged her adopted cousin.

"It's okay, I forgive you," she said quietly.

"Okay, that was the cutest thing I've ever seen," said Cortana to Kelly.

"You gonna give Joan a little brother or sister?" Kelly prodded.

John took a big gulp of his drink.

"Dear _God _no," said Cortana gravely. "If I had to be pregnant again I don't think John would survive, I am an absolute nightmare of a pregnant lady."

"She's right. She nearly killed me last time. I would rather fight my way through an entire Covenant fleet than deal with pregnant Cortana again," he said.

Phillips gulped. "Is it really that bad?"

"What, the pregnancy or labor?" asked Cortana.

"Both?" he gulped.

"Labor is pretty bad, I broke two of Fred's fingers," Kelly deadpanned.

Devereux winced.

John crossed his arms. "I can _shoot _Covenant, and then they go away. I can't shoot my wife. First few months she's throwing up the whole time and _that's _miserable, then she's angry the entire time, yelling at me for doing absolutely nothing. Last few months we didn't sleep hardly at all, and then add all of the anxiety about being a parent onto that. Not to mention I think Cortana would strangle me in my sleep if I put her through childbirth again."

"Which is why John went to the doctor and got himself fixed. Now we know not to trust UNSC birth control for Spartans. Naomi, Serin, keep that in mind," said Cortana dryly.

Naomi flushed red instantly at the thought and Serin started laughing.

"Can't really speak for Naomi but that's just not a problem I have to think about. Pretty sure there are rumors that anyone I sleep with dies the next week or that I'm hoarding human skulls in my bedroom."

"I heard a rumor you were a lesbian," contributed Mal.

"Did you? What'd you tell them? For all you know it might be true," she teased.

"I was super cryptic about it, pretty sure most people think you and Naomi are a thing."

Serin started laughing even more and Naomi frowned.

"What? Can't blame people, you guys _do _live together," he shrugged.

"So do you and Vaz," said Naomi pointedly.

"Well yeah but no one wants to _fantasize _about me and Vaz," he quipped.

Now Vaz was frowning while glaring at his best friend.

"What, it's a compliment!" he said.

Kelly, Fred and Cortana were chuckling. Vaz looked like he was getting progressively more irritated while Naomi looked like she wanted to disappear into her chair.

"We'll talk about this later, and by talk about it I mean I'm going to kick your ass," said Vaz lightly.

Mal laughed nervously. "Hey, there are kids here you probably shouldn't swear so much."

"Oh it's fine, Cortana swears almost as much as any Marine I've ever met," said Kelly lightly.

"Hey, I don't curse _that _much, do I?" said Cortana indignantly.

"Only when you're angry," replied John.

Cortana shrugged. "Whatever."

Sam and Joan had kept playing on the ground together, talking about various things.

"So Sam, Joan," Serin called, changing the subject. The two girls looked at her.

"What do you two want to do when you grow up?"

Both of the girls thought for a minute.

"I would like to be Joan's friend and then go outside by myself," Sam said carefully.

Fred started laughing.

"Sam you're already my best friend!" said Joan, giggling.

"And someday you will be able to go outside by yourself so that's a good goal," said Kelly sweetly.

"What about you Joan?" asked Naomi.

"Hmmm," Joan crossed her arms. Cortana and John looked at her, awaiting her response.

"Well, the best person I know is my dad, so when I grow up, I think I'd like to be a Dad!" She exclaimed.

Everyone started laughing at that, even John chuckling a reasonable amount.

"You can be whatever you want when you grow up Joan," he said softly. She jumped up on her dad's lap and snuggled into his chest.

Sam fell asleep on the ground and Joan was nodding off.

"I think it's time for bed," said John.

"No, I'm not tired," she said unconvincingly.

"Here, I'll put her down you stay here and talk with your friends," said Cortana softly.

John kissed his daughter on her cheek. As Cortana tried to take Joan, Joan clung to her dad and whined.

"No, I want Daaaaaad," she whined. Cortana sighed.

"I'll come to bed, you get to sleep by me and Mommy, you'll see me right when you wake up, I promise," he said.

"I want you to tuck me in," she said yawning.

"Daddy is talking with some friends he hasn't seen in a long time, let me put you to bed," said Cortana softly.

"You don't do it like Daddy does."

"Mommy has her own special tuck in, you just have to give her a chance," John said softly. He looked at Joan as she pouted, struggling to keep her eyes open. He ran a hand over her forehead and kissed her again on her forehead. "Go to sleep."

"I love you," she said resting her head on Cortana's shoulder.

John smiled softly. "I love you too Joan, sleep well."

Cortana got up and sighed. "I'll be back once I put her down, Kelly, want me to take Sam?"

"Can you carry both of them?"

"In a few months I won't be able to because Joan's a giant like her father but yeah, I think I can handle it."

Kelly passed Sam to Cortana and she hefted her up on her hip, walking towards the tents they'd set up earlier.

John took another sip of his drink. "My daughter is pretty dramatic," he explained.

Kelly scoffed. "Mostly because you spoil her," she teased.

"No I do not," said John.

"Yes you do, that girl says Daddy you practically run," said Fred, teasing him. John shrugged.

"Okay, maybe I spoil her a little, I'm sure I'm not the first father to spoil his daughter."

Mal watched him smile at the thought of his daughter and couldn't help but think it was surreal. Even the other two, Fred and Kelly, seemed so different from Naomi, different from the Admiral. He didn't know if they were just more fucked up because of their particularly tragic pasts or if the other three were just better at suppressing their issues than Naomi was.

Naomi finished her drink and grabbed herself another one. She leaned back into her chair and reached over for Vaz's hand. She sighed loudly.

Vaz glanced at her, raising an eyebrow as if to ask, "are you okay?"

She just ran her thumb over the top of his hand and leaned her head on his shoulder.

Devereux looked at Naomi.

"Hey how you doing Naomi?"

"I'm fine, just getting kind of tired, I'm not used to drinking and alcohol makes me tired."

"Naomi, how have you been? What have you been up to all these years, since you've got out? What happened to you after Reach?" asked Kelly.

Naomi sat up slightly and sipped a little more of her drink.

"After Reach I was attached to a ground unit with a few other Spartans. We did what was typical for that time in the war—killed Covenant, watched people die, orbital drops, kill Covenant, watch people die, repeat for a few years. Then when you pulled your big stunt on the Halos," she gestured at John, "the war was all of a sudden over."

She took another sip of her drink and swallowed. "But it wasn't really over, we were left with a big mess, a mess that you were gone for most of but I'm sure Kelly and Fred remember. The Office of Naval Intelligence pulled us," she gestured to Dev, Phillips, Vaz, Mal and Serin, "to form Kilo-5, and we started messing with hinge-heads and then all of a sudden we're dealing with my terrorist father and well," she sighed, "John can fill you in on that if you care to hear about it, not really fun to talk about."

Kelly's eyes widened. "Your father's a terrorist?"

"Yeah and yours could be too for all you know. Hell, you could've killed him during the insurrection a few times over, you wouldn't know any fucking better," she said irritably.

"Naomi," said Vaz calmly, running his hand up her arm. She shook her head and felt badly looking at Kelly's hurt expression.

"I'm sorry, that was uncalled for. I just...it's still very difficult for me. I know that you don't struggle as much with it and that it's

not something you think of."

Kelly folded her hands in her lap and sat up a little straighter.

"I can't relate to that exactly, I'm not particularly interested in my past or my family but I did have a kind of upsetting experience the other day," said Kelly lightly.

She folded her legs up underneath herself and tugged at her tank top strap nervously as it fell down her shoulder.

"I was grocery shopping with Samantha a few weeks ago. I'd dressed her so cutely in a little dress and and put some ribbons in her hair," Kelly smiled softly at the memory. "A mother of one of my students approached me in the grocery store."

"Oh Ms. Kelly, your daughter is so cute," she said. "She started to talk to Sam and normally Sam gets really scared of strangers but she was in a good mood that morning."

"Anyways, she was looking at Samantha and looks at me and says, 'She has such beautiful curly hair, where does she get that from?'"

Kelly searched for words and she brushed her braid over her shoulder, toying with the tail end of it.

"I didn't know what to say, I don't even remember what I said to her, I was just in complete shock. I'd never thought about it. I'd never thought about how Fred and I both have straight hair and Samantha's is curly. I don't know if my mother or father had curly hair, if _Fred's _mother or father had curly hair, our grandparents...it was unsettling to think about. I wanted to know, for the first time really ever, or at least the first time since I've been an adult, what my parents looked like."

Kelly looked down and cleared her throat.

"I know it's not the same as your situation but...it's my situation. I have my students call me Ms. Kelly because I just don't want to know my surname. We have a last name for legal purposes, it's Porter, but it doesn't _feel _like my name, it's still 087 in my brain and I _still _can't let that go. I'm happy as a mom, happy as a wife," she grabbed Fred's hand, "but I still remember everything. I loved being a Spartan. I don't want to ruin that. I don't want to tarnish my memories of being that with my file, with a ruined family and a history. I know that sounds irreverent, naive, and cowardly but it's how Fred and I both feel. It's not always easy but I don't think that either option is an easy one, there are consequences to both."

Naomi crossed her legs. She was something of a lightweight so she definitely found herself speaking her mind.

"You know, I used to be like that. I wasn't even the first person to read my file, I had Vasya do it. I had him read it and told him to tell it to me if I could handle it," Naomi crossed her legs and looked over at John, Fred, Kelly and Cortana.

"When we met up with you on Onyx with that absolute _demon _of a woman, which by the way you two were so blind you couldn't even see how screwed up that entire situation wasâ€"she thought I was _John

_for Christ's sake, you all heard her shout for him when I came up to you guys even though we all know she could tell us apart in armor. John's all she's ever cared about even if you want to believe otherwise. That all aside, I had to have Vaz tell me my own story like a little kid because I couldn't do it myself."

"Naomi," he said softly.

Naomi sighed and chuckled a little.

"All I can really say about this whole thing is I'm glad you didn't kill her, I'm glad you're not rotting in prison for her, she's not worth it," she muttered.

"We all know I've had a hit out on that woman more than once, and more than once it's blown up in my face. I'm not very superstitious but that woman has got some serious guardian angels around her that I just can't seem to touch. I figure it's worse to appease her martyr complex and really snuff her out. I think she's probably leading out some sort of miserable existence," Serin wrapped her fingers on the arm of her chair.

Cortana laughed and all of the eyes around the fire looked at her.

"I'm sorry, I just think it's funny that despite so many things, so many affirmations, so much reassurance from my husband, when you talk about Catherine all I can feel is guilt and shame. It's always been this way for me. When I first chose John and read about the Spartan-II program I vowed to protect him. I didn't want him to suffer more than he already had. I knew I would give my life for him even though we'd only known each other for such a short time. I don't know how many of you," she looked at the Spartans, "have worked with an AI but it's...it's very intimate."

"Fred and I both didn't, at least not the way you and John did, they were too valuable to spare when ships needed them."

"I did, all of Kilo-5 did, we had an AI," said Naomi.

"Well then you could maybe understand the nature of my relationship with John. John and I worked together for _years. _We were hardly ever without the other. When he was in cryo I found it maddening, on top of all my shipboard duties I would constantly be monitoring his cryo chamber. When you work together like that, when you make someone else's mind your _home _the way that John was to me...much of the time I started to believe that I myself had a heart that beat when it was his, but things like that start to become arbitrary. You start to lose where you end and the other begins and it all becomes the same. To know, all of this time that the source of my very existence was the cause of so much pain for him and simultaneously exactly why we were brought together is _still _maddening. We can never be distant from her. And I can't distance myself from her because part of me was and _is _her." Her voice cracked and she looked close to tears.

"I know it must be hard for all of you because I look like her but please know that I'm not, I'm me and I know better than almost anyone what you all went through. Having a daughter myself it's impossible for me to understand or rationalize."

Vaz looked at the woman who, though unnervingly similar looking to Halsey, couldn't seem more different. He knew that AIs were independent of their donor but he had never imagined they could be this different, this feeling. It was even more unnerving because there had to be a very hidden, very deep part of Halsey that felt remorse for her actions.

He looked at the Master Chief and how he held his wife's hand, his expression visibly concerned. It was amazing to see him do something so mundane, so normal and so simply human as hold her hand. He wondered if Naomi looked that way when she was with him, like she was handling something so comparatively breakable. At times he couldn't help but wonder which of them was the fragile one-she was the strongest person he knew and simultaneously the most fragile and sensitive.

John sighed. "It's difficult because I can't bring myself to hate her, not the way you all do. Watching the videos and experiments she either performed or facilitated was difficult. But at the same time she was at my wedding, she was there for the birth of my daughter. I know you speak of her affection for me and that's something I can't control anymore than I could control being chosen for the Spartan program. I don't have it in me to hurt her. I know it's wrong, I know it's strange but she is the closest thing to a mother I've ever known."

"But that's her _fault _John, you _had _a mother, one who probably loved you and tucked you in at night and she took that from you and replaced it with her," cried Naomi. Vaz could tell she was getting angry, she was starting to turn red and her expression verged on tears or blind rage.

"I _understand _that Naomi and I know that part of you wants me to detest her like you do but I just _can't. _I'm sorry. I understand entirely why you feel the way you feel, you deserve to feel how you feel, all of you do," he gestured to the remainder of Kilo-5, "You love Naomi and Serin, if I were in your position I would feel the same, but I'm not, I'm in my position. I can't get hung up on ifs and maybes. What she did _allowed _me to save all of humanity. I don't like to speak of myself in such grandiose terms but it's true. I'm not going to say that everything happens for a reason because there is no real _reason _to abduct and experiment on children but everything does _happen._ It _happened _and now this is happening. My feelings about Halsey change nothing besides _me. _I also can't cut her out of my life, my daughter needs a doctor who can understand her needs and can keep secrets. I don't want her to be seen as a precious commodity or an experiment. The irony of the situation doesn't escape me." John ran a hand through his hair. He felt anxious, he wasn't used to talking to this many people at once.

After a beat of silence, Serin spoke. "You know I could find her a doctor, one that works with the Spartan-IVs."

"I would never want to take away from the UNSC like that. Also realistically how many posts with Spartans do you have in the outer colonies?"

"Obviously that's sensitive information but I have an uncanny way of getting things I want done," said Serin folding her hands.

"Admiral is right, she snaps her fingers people jump, because let's be honest why does she need two random ODSTs stationed by her," said Mal lightly.

"To keep me from going batty, Margaret told me to keep a few people close," she nodded towards Vaz, Mal, Naomi, Phillips and Dev, "and everyone else at an arm's length. Further if necessary."

John thought it was an interesting concept. He couldn't imagine how stressful her job was. She was a leader with little glory and even less fanfare. She did her business in secrets and knowledge. It was a solitary craft.

"I wouldn't want you to divert UNSC resources for us. And frankly Halsey is the best. Say what you want about her but the woman is brilliant. She also cares for my daughter-it may be hard for you to believe but I can tell," said John.

"Do Spartan kids need special doctors?" Asked Dev curiously.

John glanced at Cortana warily.

"You can tell them if you like," she said shrugging.

"Due to..._events_, on the Forerunner shield world Requiem, my DNA was altered to include all of my Spartan augmentations. Some of the traits like the gene therapy and even some of the growth traits were already heritable, so Sam will probably be a bit taller, faster and stronger than her peers. Joan, however is more like me, her bone density, eyes, even her blood and tissue type are completely unique-things that have never naturally occurred in a human exist with her which is why she seems older than three," he paused, "I tell you this in greatest confidence because if the general population and even the UNSC as a whole found out I would fear the consequences. Privacy is important to us, I haven't even publically identified myself as the Master Chief," the way he said it almost sounded like he was talking about someone else, "We enjoy our privacy, we enjoy not having the public eye on us for no reason. I didn't realize that I was well known to the public until a few years after my retirement and I saw an...action figure of myself at a store," he seemed extremely uncomfortable about the concept.

"This group is pretty used to keeping some big secrets John, it's not something you need to worry about," Serin replied. The rest of the group nodded.

"So she's like...a ready made Spartan?" asked Mal.

John shook his head. "No. Being strong and fast, wearing armor, those aren't what make a Spartan, ask any of them." He was stern. It was easy to see the Spartan that he had been during the war in his facial expression—he was intense but without drama, sharp and to the point.

"He's right. It's so much more than that. We've been Spartans since we were six. Serin is still a Spartan to us. We don't forget our own. That's why we are here right now—there are so few of us left from our original class," said Kelly.

"This is the family we have left. This is the family that was given

to us and we treasure it more than anything," agreed Fred.

Serin smiled softly. "That's nice to hear. It felt difficult to belong anywhere after I washed out. What was even harder was realizing I didn't really _want _to belong."

"What happened to you after the procedures?" Asked Kelly softly.

Serin's expression darkened. "I underwent all of the procedures as well as anyone until the last phase of the ceramic ossification process. I started having a potentially fatal allergic reaction to the materials, all I remember is excruciating pain beyond anything, even leading up to the ossification felt better than this. They put me in a coma for two months. I woke up crying and terrified, I wanted to go back to all of you but was told I would only be a hindrance and distraction. I spent months on pain medications and half sedated. It was even more dehumanizing than everything else. I focused on learning to walk again-the procedure had left me crippled," she paused for a moment and looked pained.

"The only thing I vividly remember was one evening, late at night before I was shipped off to Earth, I was tied to my bed because I would thrash myself to sleep, Chief Mendez came and he just wept. He cried more than I've ever seen a man cry," she inhaled deeply, clearly envisioning the evening so long ago.

Naomi remembered seeing him on Onyx and how he had looked at Serin, she could tell that he had been moved seeing her walk. Naomi couldn't resent himâ€"he was a military man who did his job. Yes, he should have perhaps spoke up about what had been occurring but she knew he felt a great deal of remorse.

"One day after I had weaned myself off most of the narcotic pain medications unbeknownst to my caretakers Admiral Parangosky herself came to my bedside. She asked me what I wanted to do. She told me I could get out and get placed somewhere safe or I could become greater than anyone had ever planned. I was confused because I felt like a failure, I wasn't with all of you being the Spartan I was made to be," she paused, when her voice wavered slightly.

"She saw the ruin I was and saw something in me. She saved me. She was probably the closest thing to a parent I'd ever had. She sent me to officer school and since I graduated I was groomed to become the commander-in-chief of ONI. One of the most difficult things was seeing Spartans and feeling like I couldn't talk to you. The small handful of people who knew just _what _I was, what I was supposed to be always would comment 'Wow, you look so normal,' and I'd want to scream. I'm not normal, I constantly have to take muscle relaxers so my freakishly strong muscles don't crush my bones. I can't ever be normal and I don't know if I ever wanted to be. The worst part is I've been told I could try the Spartan-IV bone augmentation, it's far less dangerous than the ceramic ossification and yields similar results but I _can't _do it. I'm too scared to have a major surgery again, I wake up at night screaming about it still. I would rather live with the chronic pain than go under a knife again," she scoffed. "I know it's pathetic but I just can't bring myself to do it."

Kelly shook her head. "It's not pathetic at all. I couldn't do it-I took weeks to recover from the procedures, everyone whispered around

me about how I was going to die. I also still struggle with fire," she pulled up her tank top revealing her midsection that was covered in scars from hastily treated third degree burns, "we all have things, either from the war or just our pasts that affect us."

"We ODSs don't usually live long enough to get post traumatic stress but I panic in small spaces because I've been held prisoner and had the living shit beaten out of me," offered Mal, "People like to be tough, don't like to talk about things that bother them like that but I think most everyone who's seen any kind of action has things that bother them."

"I still have flashbacks from watching Mal piss himself when we were held together, that kind of stuff is just burned into your mind," said Vaz, attempting to lighten the mood a bit.

Everyone burst into some much needed laughter, Kelly laughing particularly hard.

"I'm not used to talking to ODSs, you guys are pretty funny," said Kelly.

"ODSs and Spartans don't really have a history of being pals," said Mal.

"I've noticed that and kind of wondered why, didn't think about it much but I did notice it," said Kelly.

"It's because command gives us all the glory for the war and the effort when more of them die. They're often put in more dangerous positions when we would be more effective because we're too expensive to lose," Naomi said bitterly.

"Naomi if this is about that time on Sanghelios you understand why I had to make that decision," said Serin lightly.

"Oh I understand why you had to make it, but now that I'm not your subordinate I can express how bullshit it was, if Vaz or Mal had died I would've blamed myself for the rest of my life."

"You would've been bored sweetheart, the party didn't even start til you dropped in and you fucked 'em up pretty good-she may be kinda quiet but the lady is pretty fierce and not without her drama," said Mal laughing.

Naomi smiled softly.

"Ooh, tell us a Naomi story," encouraged Kelly.

"Yeah it's been a long time," agreed Fred.

"Okay we will but first we all need to take a shot of liquor, stories are all better with liquor," Mal got up to go get shot glasses.

* * *

><p>Hope you enjoyed, I love your reviews so thanks to those of you that do! :) Have a great holiday.<p>

34. Chapter 34

Last chapter before I ship out, so I don't know when next things will be posted until I get into some sort of a schedule. I hope you guys all had a wonderful holiday and enjoy the chapter.

* * *

><p>"Jesus these are huge shot glasses," mused Cortana. "This will put me on my ass."<p>

"Kinda the point sunshine," said Mal pouring liquor.

"What is this?," asked John observing the dark purple color.

"Got this on Cascade when we took shore leave, I think a lady gave it to me when I told her Vaz got that pretty scar on his face grappling a hinge-head."

"I still don't know why she gave it to you, I'm the one who's all disfigured." Vaz gestured at his cheek sarcastically.

"I'm the cuter one and you scare people," said Mal pointedly.

"Shit are you just gonna take that?," said Serin lightly.

"No, it's okay, I'm the one with theâ€|," he searched for words, his English wasn't always the best," what did you call her Mal, the 'Swedish model girlfriend with a perfect ass?"

Naomi glared at Mal. "I'm sorry, is my ass something that comes up regularly for you?"

"I told you to never tell her about that! I was drunk when I said that, I thought you were my brother!"

"I know why you put him on your team, you keep him around to say stupid stuff and when something goes wrong you can blame him," said John sarcastically.

"Pretty much," agreed Serin.

"Naomi, it's a compliment, besides I know I'm not your type, you like your men Russian and angry," he said quickly pouring her a shot.

"Yeah, yeah keep pouring," she said lowly.

"Okay we have to toast to something, then me and Vaz will play out one of the best Naomi stories," Mal said theatrically.

"I did not agree to that," growled Vaz.

"Yeah, sure, whatever we'll get around to that problem in a minute. Admiral, what do we toast to?"

She thought for a second and raised her glass, "let's keep it simple, to old friends," she gestured to the Spartans.

"Cheers," said Mal, everyone raised their glass and drank.

Cortana sputtering and coughing, her eyes watering.

"Wooo," Serin shook her head and smacked herself on the cheek "I think my lips are going kinda numb."

"John your lips are blue," Kelly screeched, laughing wildly, clearly already much more intoxicated than before.

John rubbed at his lips but it didn't do much good. Kelly was in tears.

"You look ridiculous!," she giggled.

John crossed his arms. "Why are your lips all not blue?"

"You got the end of the bottle mate, I think there must be stuff that settles to the bottom, sorry bout that."

"I'm Master Chief Petty Officer John-117, I have blue lips," said Kelly loudly.

Cortana started laughing while coughing a little bit from the drink.

"Kelly are you okay?" she said gasping while she laughed.

"Oh yeah I'm fine, fit as a fiddle," she leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, a silly grin on her face.

"I don't sound like that," said John, his tone was surprisingly immature.

"He has a point, things tend to die a little faster than it would take him to say that whole spiel," commented Cortana realistically.

Vaz, Mal, Phillips and Devereux couldn't help but feel amazed that that was just the _normal _for these people.

"Yeah but can you imagine? Dear God in heaven that would just be too funny," commented Fred, laughing still with his wife.

Serin shook her head. _I would've never imagined this. I would've never imagined that my life could be like this. This easy, this fun with such kind people. _She blinked a few times. _Damn it, I'm such a fucking emotional drunk. _

Kelly calmed down a little bit but she and Fred were still snickering here and there.

"Okay Vaz let's go!"

"I'm not doing this," Vaz crossed his arms and shook his head slightly.

"Come on you be the hinge-head and I'll be Naomi," he coaxed.

"Shouldn't you have _Phyllis_ be the hinge-head? He _does _speak

Sanghelli," said Vaz sarcastically.

"Yknow, when I first met you I thought you were a little dumb but your English was just bad, that's a pretty good plan. Phyllis get up!"

Phillips got bashful until Dev shoved him up by Mal.

"Okay so what am I doing?," he asked, his hand behind his head, clearly anxious.

"Just listen to me _narrate._"

Phillips sighed.

"Okay so it was just a normal day with Kilo-5, we were doing our usual shady, screw with hinge-head stuff and this sonofabitch Jul m'Dama has become a bit of a thorn in our side," he looked at Phillips pointedly.

"What do you want me to do?!"

"I dunno be a thorn in our side!" Mal pouted.

Phillips sighed and crossed his arms and made a very half hearted proclamation in Sanghelli.

"Oh come on _Efan Phyllis," _Naomi, Vaz and Devereux laughed at the inside joke, "I've heard you do a lot better than that."

He sighed and said something that sounded quite angry.

"That's more like it, anyways," he stood up straighter "so naturally we send Naomi in, she's in her fancy ass blue armor shit and drops right in," he put his hand on his hip and popped it out looking super sassy.

"Hey, I don't do that," said Naomi.

"Shh, give me some artistic license okay?"

"Kay, so our girl comes in and starts to _kick his ass_, not like, just regular ass kicking but like, super ass kicking," said Mal.

Relatively quickly, Mal had flipped Phillips on his back. He let out a rather high pitched squeal on the way down.

"Pretty sure the hinge-head didn't make that sound when Naomi drop kicked him," he muttered. "Anyways, then she stomps on the damn things face and it _begs _for mercy!"

"Sanghelli don't beg for mercy Mal," said Phillips irritably on the ground.

Mal stepped on his chest "Beg for mercy!" He shouted dramatically.

"Mercy," he groaned, clearly annoyed.

"Jul m'Dama would never speak such common words.!" He said pressing his foot harder.

Phillips said something in Sanghelli, clearly exasperated.

Cortana started laughing.

"What'd he say?" whispered John.

"Basically called him an idiot, but whatever," she smirked.

"Okay, then the best part is when Naomi stomped on him again and _then, _she takes off her helmet" he twisted dramatically and shook his head, as if he was shaking out his imaginary long hair, "she looks down at the motherfucker as if to say 'I AM WOMAN HEAR ME ROAR!' The damn thing's face was so angry, you could tell he was pissed off that he got his ass kicked by a chick," Mal smirked mischievously. "And that's the story of Vaz's favorite _alone-time _fantasy."

Vaz started yelling angry sounding words in Russian and tackled Mal to the ground. Mal was somewhere in between laughing and punching his best friend back.

Naomi started laughing. They usually spent time beating the shit out of each other and it was something Naomi found highly amusing.

I love them both so much.

When it seemed like someone was actually going to get hurt, she got up and picked Vaz up off the ground easily. He will still muttering Russian obscenities.

"I can't let you strangle your best friend," she said soothingly and set him on the ground. The image was rather ridiculous, almost like that of a mother picking up a toddler throwing a tantrum except it was Naomi and her boyfriend.

He crossed his arms and glared at Mal. Mal dusted himself and got up, still chuckling.

"You say one more thing about my girlfriend's body, even her little pinky toe, and I'm going to do to you what the winter does to trees but in a Russian way," he growled sitting back down.

Serin burst out laughing. "Holy _shit _Vaz you do not fuck around."

"Naomi you should keep him around," said John seriously.

Naomi laughed. "I plan on it, don't know if anyone else can put up with my shit despite my 'perfect ass.'"

Mal laughed as he got up, seemingly unphased by the threat.

"You two are cute, you remind me of a couple in a book I read," sighed Kelly.

Naomi laughed, "Seriously? I'm pretty much the worst girlfriend in the world, I have baggage even a therapist wouldn't want to touch, I

hog the bed and I don't even put out," she said sarcastically.

"_Dorogaya_," Vaz said softly.

Cortana smiled softly at Vaz's use of a Russian pet-name. She felt a kinship with him. Loving a Spartan was difficult.

"I don't mind that you hog the bed," he said smiling, effectively diffusing the situation.

"I wouldn't worry about it, sex is pretty overrated," said Serin nonchalantly.

Kelly's eyes widened. "I'm pretty sure you weren't doing it right then," she said adamantly.

"Gotta say I agree with her on that one," said Dev lightly.

"Did they fuck up your thyroid implant or something?" asked Serin taking a sip of a beer.

"Nah, she's just hopped up on hormones and now she can't keep her pants on," said Cortana dryly.

Kelly slapped her on the arm. "Shut up!," she chuckled.

"What about you?" Serin asked incredulously, looking at John.

He looked away. "That's a very personal question."

"I mean you have a kid so unless it was just some one time coincidence..."

"John would tell you that the stork brought her or we found her in the woods but really he's just a bashful guy-it's not really an issue, I'll leave it at that," said Cortana snarkily.

"I'm _private_, not bashful," muttered John.

Kelly looked at Cortana and rolled her eyes.

"Oh the things I could say right now," she trailed off.

Cortana's eyes widened, "Shut up Kelly or I'll start telling everyone about what you and Fred did when you were at that press conference thing on Reach."

"You wouldn't dare."

"You told her about that?!," said Fred, eyes wide.

"I can talk to my friend about whatever I want to," she said stubbornly.

"I don't go talk to John about our sex life," he muttered.

"I wouldn't _want _you to," commented John, "whatever Kelly and Cortana talk about I would prefer to remain completely oblivious."

"Well this has been enlightening," said Serin.

"I thought you two just drank and watched those stupid wedding reality shows," said Fred.

"Don't knock them until you watch them for one and two that's not _all _we do don't be so sexist," scolded Kelly.

"Kelly, if I had had to guess I think this would've been the last thing I would've expected you to do in your retirement," mused Serin.

"What _did _you expect us to do?" asked Fred.

"I really have no idea," she said.

"Well so what, I can be a Spartan and like trashy romance novels, if there's one thing I've earned it's the right to sit on my ass and read some shitty books with a glass of wine," she crossed her arms in front of her and rolled her eyes. "Maybe I will pen a smutty Spartan romance novel just because I could," she pouted and took a pull off her drink.

"I don't think anyone is going to challenge you on that one ma'am," said Devereux.

"Please don't call me ma'am, I was enlisted unlike these two," she pointed at Fred and Serin, "and I was never a Chief like this one," she nodded her head at John. "I like to actually do work," she said smugly.

"That's something I can agree with," said Mal raising his glass. Kelly laughed at him, raised hers and took a big gulp.

Cortana looked over at Vaz, who was looking at Naomi sadly. Naomi was just staring at the fire and swishing her beer around idly.

"I think I'm going to go to bed," said Naomi standing up quickly. "I'll see you all in the morning." She got up and walked quickly into the house letting the patio door slam behind her.

Vaz sighed deeply and looked distraught.

Fred started talking about his exhibit and Phillips started talking about a nuanced Sanghelli joke to the group.

Cortana got up and sat on the bench that Naomi had been sitting on next to Vaz. She crossed her legs and looked at him.

"Do you want to talk?" she asked in perfect Russian.

He looked shocked to have someone speak to him in his native language but then remembered that she probably spoke any language he could think of and probably a few he couldn't. He sighed and turned to her.

"I don't know what to do," he said lowly.

"You probably knew that this wasn't going to be an easy or normal

relationship."

"Yes, I just worry that I'm making her miserable."

"How would you be doing that?"

"Naomi is the most selfless person I know. I worry that I just remind her of all the things she doesn't have. She's always hung up on the fact that we don'tâ€¦" he trailed off.

"Don't have sex," finished Cortana. He nodded.

"And I think it makes her feel guilty even though I've told her it shouldn't. She doesn't understand that just because I wake up with morning wood or that I get, you know," he gestured in front of himself with his hands, "hot and bothered when we're...together, that I don't _expect _anything from her, I don't care if we _ever _have sex, I understand things are difficult for her and her past is even more complicated than the other Spartans, even if that's hard to believe. I justâ€¦"

"You love her and want her to understand that you don't expect anything that she's uncomfortable with," said Cortana.

"Yes," he sighed and rubbed his temples.

"If it's any consolation, John and I didn't have sex when I was an AI," she joked.

He chuckled. "Do you consider that the beginning of your relationship?"

Cortana nodded. "We have always been close, we've always belonged together. I think it took John longer to realize though. You have to understand that they were trained to compartmentalize themselves, to forget on command and act without even thinking. They are capable of putting each component of their personalities into tiny spaces and ignoring them if they have to, it's why Spartans got such a reputation for being unfeeling and even sociopathic, when in reality they just cope however they can like the rest of us. Naomi is in a difficult place right now. From what I can tell, she loves you very much but wants to hold that back because she thinks that you deserve someone who can give you a more normal relationship. You need to give her time and be patient with her, stick around until she realizes you aren't leaving and that you're not just pitying her," she paused and looked at him. She could tell he'd been thinking about this for a long time and that he was relatively upset.

"When she _does _realize that, you'll be amazed. Spartans, Vasily," she grabbed his hand and looked at him, "are _truly _the best of us. When given the chance, they are capable of more good and more love than you would ever imagine. It's difficult, but I can assure you that loving them makes _us," _she put her hand on his heart, "better people. It takes patience and it takes understanding, but if you really, truly love her, it's going to be okay. It just takes _time_."

He nodded slowly, processing what she had just said. "I think that's what I needed to hear. Coming from you it's very encouraging."

"Anytime, sometimes we've got to stick together. Don't know how many couples like us there are out there," she laughed.

"I think you've got Naomi and I beat on that front," he debated for a moment about whether he should ask what was on his mind. "How did you become," he gestured at her.

"Human?"

He nodded.

Cortana sighed and crossed her arms. "I have many theories but no solid answers. Do you want to hear what I've finally decided on? I haven't told anyone this."

"Sure."

"I sacrificed myself for John. When I said goodbye to him he begged me not to go, he couldn't understand. I genuinely think that because John wanted to find me badly enough that he made it happen. He's always been that way, he's never been someone you could tell no. If there is one, single thing that I know to be true, out of all the knowledge of humanity and even beyond that, I know that John and I were meant to love each other. We were meant to be together. And that's all I have ever needed to know," she smiled. "It's difficult, but I can tell you love her and that will be enough. Just love her as much as you possibly can and it's going to turn out just fine."

He looked down and sighed. "I do love her. I love her more than I've loved anyone or anything. I just want to help her. She doesn't deserve to feel badly or suffer ever again. I...it's a long story, but I promised her father I would look after her. She doesn't know that, but occasionally I will get anonymous letters asking how she is. I send correspondence to one of her half-brothers who I believe gives it to her father who, as far as the UNSC is concerned, is dead, and Osman wants to keep it that way, she doesn't want to have to interfere, the last thing she wants to do is put a hit on Naomi's father. Naomi knows he's out there and alive but doesn't know I speak with him. I wonder when it's the right time to tell her that."

"You'll know the right time. You know her and you're doing the best you can."

"You really know what to say."

"I've been around the block a time or two with Spartans," she laughed and stood up, yawning dramatically.

"John I'm tired, I'm going to go to bed."

"I'm tired too, we'll see you in the morning," he said putting his beer bottle in the recycling bin.

Serin stood up and poured some water on the fire. "Let's call it an evening. Dev, Phillips, Mal, you're welcome to crash here. Vaz, you go do whatever you do when you're here." She didn't really want to think about Vaz and Naomi, even if whatever they did was probably more innocent than most things on TV.

Vaz watched Cortana grab the Master Chief's hand as they walked toward their tent. He could just see how happy they were together, it was really amazing.

He quietly walked up the stairs to what had sort of become him and Naomi's half of the house. He opened the door and went quietly into the bathroom to brush his teeth and take off his clothes.

He looked at Naomi. She seemed asleep. She was laying on her side and clutching a pillow, her hair fanned out. He pulled the covers down and crawled into bed. He wrapped his arms around Naomi, holding her close to him. He couldn't help but run his hand through her hair and sigh.

"I love you Naomi Sentzke, for everything you are and everything you aren't, and I'm going to stick around and tell you that until you believe it more than anything you've ever believed before," he kissed her temple and closed his eyes. "And when we're both old and wrinkly you'll be happy. We'll have the life you're supposed to have," he whispered softly before he fell asleep.

* * *

><p>Please review, makes my heart sing. :)<p>

35. Chapter 35

Hi everyone! Wow it's been a while. I'm really busy. Internet is shady at best here, but here's a long chapter. Forgive me if there are errors, got some sand in my eyes.

* * *

><p>Joan woke up and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes.<p>

Mom and Dad were still sleeping. It was a special occasion when she got to sleep by Mom and Dad, it was usually only when she was sick. When Mom was away from the house Dad let her sleep by him but that was a secret.

Mom gave the best snuggles. She always smelled nice and her chest and belly were soft-perfect for resting her head on. Dad was too bony and his arms were too heavy to snuggle for very long, but the whiskers on his face that were sometimes there were fun to touch while he was sleeping. She did just that and giggled to herself.

"Joan," Mom said sleepily, "go back to sleep."

"But I don't wanna," she whispered loudly.

"Then go play," she muttered.

"Where is the blonde lady?"

She was pretty and had soft hands like mom and also smelled nice.

"Inside," she muttered, flipping her face back onto her pillow.

That was all Joan needed to know.

Naomi sighed. She was half asleep half awake. It was one of her favorite times of the day, she felt less inhibited than she usually did.

She snuggled closer to Vaz and could feel him poking at her backside, which she had started to realize was just normal for some men in the morning. She heard him inhale deeply and he ran his hand up and down her arm then wrapped his fingers in hers.

"You smell so nice," he mumbled sleepily into her shoulder.

"Mm," she sighed.

After a few minutes he rested his hand on her stomach underneath her shirt and absentmindedly traced circles.

She now felt a little more awake but still groggy. He did this occasionally on the few slow mornings they had together.

Without disturbing his hand she turned so she was facing him. His eyes were still closed.

She inhaled and grabbed his wrist. She slowly moved his hand until it was resting on her breast. She saw him smile and grab at her reflexively.

This is nice, she thought to herself.

His eyes flew open and he tried to pull away

"I'm sorry, I thought I was dreaming-"

"Shh," she put a finger on his mouth. "Keep dreaming," she whispered and kissed him softly.

He seemed reluctant until she kissed him a little more intensely, the way he normally kissed her, and he sighed, relaxing and pressing himself to her.

Oh wow, this is nice, she thought to herself as he continued to kiss her. Am I supposed to feel nervous and giddy like this?

He seemed more confident and she wrapped her arm around him, pulling him closer to her.

She ran her hands over his bare chest, enjoying how his skin felt under her fingertips.

She felt something jump onto the foot of their bed. Her eyes widened and she quickly pulled away from Vaz, looking down at the foot of the bed and saw messy red hair and a t-shirt with a cartoon rabbit on it.

"Hi," she chirped. "Mommy said you were inside."

Vaz's heart was pumping in his chest. One moment he was having perhaps the best two minutes of his life and the next there was a

child in his bed.

"Where is your mommy?"

"She's still sleeping by Daddy," she whispered, "I came to find you to play with me," she crawled up in between them and smiled a toothy grin.

Naomi smiled softly.

"I suppose it's about time we get up anyways. Do you want to help me make breakfast for everyone?"

"Yeah!" She yelled. Vaz winced and noticed her voice was really high pitched when she was excited.

Naomi got out of bed and made to her dresser to change when Joan crossed her arms, stood up on the bed and said "no, I want to go noooowwww." Naomi laughed and put on her slippers and robe.

Joan grabbed her hand and started dragging her out the door.

"Vasya, are you coming?"

He shifted his legs uncomfortably. "Give me a minute."

She smiled. "Okay, see you soon."

Joan skipped into the kitchen and climbed up into a stool by the island.

"What're we gonna cook? "

Naomi pulled out her only cookbook. Vaz had gotten it for her, it was entitled Swedish Cooking.

"Let's pick something from here but first let me braid my hair."

"Oooh can you do mine too?"

Naomi smiled. She was entirely too adorable.

"Sure, let me grab a brush quick."

Naomi came back to the kitchen to see Joan swinging her legs and humming to herself. She reached up to braid her own hair but Joan stopped her.

"Wait," she asked.

"Hmm?"

"Can I brush your hair?"

Naomi laughed. "Sure, if you'd like."

She clumsily ran the brush through her hair until all the knots and tangles were smoothed out.

"Your hair is so pretty," she said, running her tiny hands through it. "It looks like sunshine," she said in awe.

"Thank you, your hair is very beautiful as well," she said politely. She had a hard time receiving compliments, especially on her appearance. Joan watched as she braided her hair quickly.

"My dad braids my hair."

"Does he now?"

"Yeah, he always has hair ties with him for me." She smiled widely when it was her turn to have her hair braided.

"Okay so how does Pannkaka sound, book says it's normally for dessert and not breakfast but I don't think we have ingredients for a lot of the breakfast food, we have some jam and fruit."

"Okay!"

"Help me measure the flour," she lifted Joan up onto the counter and they proceeded to measure and mix the necessary ingredients.

Vaz walked into the kitchen as quietly as he could. He smiled at what he saw. Naomi was concentrating hard on cooking, Joan was standing on the counter passing her various utensils and helping clumsily stir batter. He was always amazed at the wide range of skills she had as well as the wide range of emotions. She had been so stoic, so restrained and so on edge all of her time on the active duty, even towards the end of her service. Seeing her with her hair down on a regular basis had been an adjustment, let alone in civilian clothes outside of armor. She was by no means a relaxed person, but seeing her smiling, hands covered in flour and sun shining on her face through the window made him happy.

He tried his best to sneak up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. She laughed lowly.

"You think you're sneaky but I knew you were there," she said flipping a pancake.

"What gave me away this time?" He asked, running his hands up her forearms.

"There's a breeze coming in through the window you were standing in front of, I stopped feeling the breeze and when I paid attention I could smell," she paused, "Vaz smell," she decided on.

He let go of her and chuckled, walked over to the island and sat on a stool. "Vaz smell? What is Vaz smell?"

Naomi shrugged and looked down bashfully, "I don't know, it's just how you smell."

"Look at you, you're such a domestic goddess." Serin walked into the kitchen and started making coffee.

"Well you know me," she said sarcastically, flipping a pancake.

"Joan, open the oven so I can put this in there with the others," she said.

Joan smiled brightly, excited about helping.

Kelly and Fred walked in from the patio, Sam following behind them.

"Wow, smells good, do you cook a lot?" Fred asked, sitting down at the island.

"Not really, I have a good helper," she said, picking up Joan and setting her on the counter again. Joan giggled and kissed Naomi on the cheek.

"I like to help," she agreed.

Naomi thought it was a little odd how affectionate Joan was. It meant that John and Cortana must both be rather affectionate with her and she had a difficult time imagining that. Affection made Naomi uncomfortable. She had a hard time receiving hugs even from someone like Mal, it just wasn't a natural reaction for her.

"Where are Cortana and John?" Kelly looked around the kitchen.

"Still asleep as far as I know, Joan woke up and jumped in my bed this morning," said Naomi.

"She does that sometimes," said Fred. "Usually when she sleeps over at our house she pops in by us in the morning. She's a snuggly little thing." Joan smiled and laughed.

"It's true I love snuggles," she agreed. She walked over to Fred on the counter and wrapped her arms around his neck. He smiled and ran his hand over her braid.

"Your hair is braided, it's really pretty," he said to her.

"Thank you, she did it!" she pointed at Naomi.

"Daddy," Sam whined, indicating she wanted to be picked up. Fred sighed and pulled her up so he had both girls on his lap.

"Look at how lucky I am, two great little girls want my attention," he smiled and kissed Sam on her cheek. She smiled and giggled. Naomi couldn't help but notice how beautiful it was, the way that her eyes crinkled when she laughed and the way she snuggled closer to her father. It made her feel a very specific sadness that she quickly buried underneath her layer of Spartan indifference that she had built up over the course of her lifetime. Indifference was easier than sadness. She could do indifference.

"Dad can you do my hair?" asked Sam.

"I have to get back to work," said Joan seriously. "I'll be back later Uncle Fred," she stepped onto the countertop again and asked Naomi what else she could help with.

Mal walked in and sat at the kitchen table. "Can I have some orange juice?" he grumbled.

"What am I, your mother? Get it yourself," barked Serin. He sighed and dragged his feet to the fridge.

"Did Dev and Phyllis go home last night?" asked Naomi.

"Yes, Dev doesn't sleep well right now and wanted to be in their bed, plus she didn't really drink so she was fine to drive anyways," said Mal as he poured himself some orange juice.

"Naomi that smells amazing," he said excitedly.

"It's unusual for them to sleep so late, or at least John, he's always up early, Cortana can sleep forever," said Kelly.

"Maybe he's getting old," said Naomi.

"Don't say that, we're all the same age and I am not old, I have a toddler," glared Kelly. Naomi just shrugged.

"Joan," called Kelly.

"Yes Auntie Kelly?"

"Why don't you and Sammy go wake up your mother and father, we don't want them to miss breakfast." she said.

"Can I wake them up loud?" Joan whispered mischievously.

"What I don't know doesn't hurt me," shrugged Kelly. Joan giggled loudly and grabbed Sam's hand, dragging her outside.

Fred smiled. "Go out to the deck, you should witness this," he opened the patio door and everyone filed out and leaned over the deck railing, watching the two girls as they appeared to sneak toward the tent John and Cortana were sleeping in.

Joan appeared to be unzipping the tent cover as slowly as she possibly could.

Serin knew that John most assuredly heard it but probably was too lazy to wake up and deal with what he was sure was Joan coming into the tent.

"MOMMY DADDY IT'S TIME TO WAKE UP!"

They all watched as they heard yells come from the tent, variations on "GET UP!" and "MOM!" and even Sam was yelling, albeit quieter than Joan "Uncle John, Aunt Ana wake up!"

The tent started moving with what could only be the two girls throwing themselves at the sides of the tent and jumping up and down.

"What the hell?" They heard Cortana say, clearly still asleep.

With a groan, John, clad only in his sleeping shorts unzipped the tent. He was holding both girls by their pants and did not look very amused. He slung a change of clothes over his shoulder and all but stomped across the yard to the laughing bystanders.

He swung the girls by their sleeping bottoms, they both kept giggling as he carried them. He walked up the stairs and Vaz and Mal couldn't help but stare at him—the man was huge, not to mention ripped.

Without even glancing at either of them, he literally threw the girls at Kelly and Fred, one to each of them. Both girls giggled as they were tossed as if they were used to it.

"I'm going to take a shower," he grumbled, walking into the house without shutting the patio door behind him.

They filed back into the house, laughing.

"You did well Joan," laughed Kelly pinching her cheek.

"We woke them up," she giggled.

"Yes you did," Kelly cooed.

"That bloke is huge," sighed Mal. "I mean, I know that sounds dumb what would I expect but damn," he whistled.

Kelly sat down and set Joan on the counter again.

"John is actually pretty average as far as Spartans go, you should've seen Sam. Sam was an easy 7'6'' without armor, he had to have been around 7'10'' with it," Kelly said wistfully. She looked as if she could remember him perfectly. She laughed. "He was a monster," she said affectionately. She sighed.

"He was one of the first casualties in the Human-Covenant War. He went how he wanted and on his own terms, fought the Covenant until he blew up the slip-space drive himself," she smiled sadly. "I'm sure you understand this being an ODST but sometimes you lose someone and despite being used to your friends dying this one person can really stick with you, not a day goes by that I don't think of Sam." She looked at her daughter and ruffled her hair affectionately.

"Sometimes I think Mal's my only friend because he's the only one who's not dead," sad Vaz, his thick accent making the statement sound particularly grave.

"Aw, thanks mate, I love you too," said Mal rolling his eyes though it was clear he understood the sentiment.

"What about the birds?"

Kelly looked confused.

"He means the female Spartans," clarified Naomi.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"I'm from the UK," he said proudly.

"Us females...I have a hard time remembering for some reason. We didn't have as much variance in height, Naomi, are you taller than me?"

"I think so by about half an inch though," she said as she scrambled some eggs.

"Yes, it wasn't a large amount between the tallest of us females and the shortest. Linda is tall, I remember that."

"Where is Linda?" asked Naomi.

"She's off on a planet far, far away in a comune. She's been living monastically since she got out, couldn't even leave to come to John's wedding, but I think she's happy," said Fred.

"Hmm, that's very fitting," said Naomi.

"Why is it fitting?" asked Serin.

"I don't know how much you recall about Linda but she was always very...intense, but differently than us. She made shooting...man, I can't even describe it, it was an art watching her set up for a shot. She was nothing short of amazing, only sniper in the UNSC who didn't need a second to spot for her, in fact she hated it, they usually threw her off." Naomi smiled softly.

"When John disappeared and we moved squads around she was on my team and it was nothing short of impressive. I'm an okay shot," he looked down bashfully, it was clear where his daughter got that mannerism.

"You're more than okay, Linda's the only one better than you," smiled Kelly. Fred looked a little flustered at her praise.

"Well, anyways, Linda, in the few minutes before her shot she would be in her own world, it was her own Linda zen mode. She has this bright red hair, brighter than John or Joan and something about her would just suck everything out of the air, she was so focused and just on another level than the rest of us. It was amazing," Fred said wistfully.

Vaz looked at Naomi. She was smiling. She almost never smiled when she talked about her past as a Spartan like this. He knew that this was good for her, being around her people. The Admiral had already helped her so much but being with them for a little time seemed to be very good.

"And Kelly here is the fastest person alive," said Cortana, yawning and pouring herself a cup of coffee.

"Mom," Joan went and jumped on her.

"Ugh, you're a little demon child," she groaned despite hugging her closer to her and kissing her good morning.

"Naomi what's your super special Spartan super power?" asked Mal.
"Can you fly?"

Naomi started setting plates out for everyone.

"Nope, I'm not really special, I'm just your run of the mill child super soldier, though I have been told that I twirl well in Mjolnir,"

she said sarcastically.

Cortana chuckled. "That's okay, John's physical and mental stats were nothing particularly impressive, I think he scored a little lower than you in some areas, you're better at science."

Naomi scoffed. "I'm sure that really held him back. Besides, John is the luckiest, he wins that."

"You can't measure luck," argued Mal.

"No, you can't but...just trust us, John is the luckiest," agreed Kelly.

He walked into the kitchen dressed. Joan perked up and ran over to him. He sighed and picked her up and kissed her on the cheek.

"You are very naughty, you know your mother doesn't like to be woken up like that," he mock scolded. Joan giggled.

"I'm sneaky," she said wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Breakfast is done, everyone come serve yourselves," announced Naomi.

"I helped!" proclaimed Joan excitedly.

"Yes you did, you were a very good help," agreed Naomi.

John went to the plate of breakfast food and reached for a pancake.

"No, pick this one," she pointed at one, "I made that one for you," she smiled.

"Oh really?" asked John.

"Mhmm."

"I think I let her pour the batter for that one," commented Naomi as she spread jam on her cakes.

"Do you want to eat off of my plate or do you want your own plate?"

"I want to share with you," she said.

John smiled. Joan had a very sweet, very kind nature that he appreciated. She was always willing to share and very happy to help others.

"I couldn't help but overhear your conversation, Cortana, what was my five mile run time when I was fourteen?"

"17:55," she said quickly.

Kelly snickered. "John you're such a fatty."

John and Fred rolled their eyes.

"What the living fuck man," murmured Mal to Vaz. The entire thing was crazy.

"Naomi this is great," said Cortana as she ate.

Naomi shrugged. "You two watch wedding shows I watch food shows, we all have our daytime television preferences."

Kelly laughed. "This is really good though."

"Channeling my Swedish ancestors I suppose," she said dryly.

"You know, that was probably the only decent part of reading my file, I found out I was Turkish so I could justify eating kabobs practically every other day," added Serin. "I suppose with a name like Serin it was pretty obvious."

"John what are you?" asked Kelly curiously.

"You all know I'm outer colony but my family originated from the eastern seaboard of the Americas," he said as he wiped some jam off of Joan's chin.

"John is pretty much an anglo-saxon through and through, I think the term was wasp, white anglo-saxon protestant," added Cortana knowledgeably.

"I knew there was something I liked about you," said Mal gesturing at him.

"I could do without the sunburn," said John dryly.

After everyone was finished with breakfast, Vaz kissed Naomi on the cheek. "Thank you for making breakfast," he said appreciatively.

Joan looked at the two of them.

"Are you a Mom and Dad?" she asked them, crossing her arms.

Naomi frowned a little. "No, why would you ask that?"

"Because you give each other smooches," she said matter of factly. "Moms and Dads give each other smooches, right Sam?"

Sam nodded.

"That's not how it works," explained Cortana.

"But you and Dad give smooches to each other," she protested.

"Yes, we do, but smooches, don't make people mothers and fathers," explained Cortana.

"But what does then?" asked Sam. It was easy to see that both girls were confused and getting somewhat frustrated with the scenario—it didn't make sense to them.

"Vaz and I aren't a Mom and Dad because we don't have a child together," explained Naomi.

"But they kiss each other because they love each other," explained Cortana.

Joan frowned. "But then how do you become a mom and dad?"

Cortana sighed. "You have to have a child together to become a mom and dad."

"How does that happen?" asked Sam, squirming in her mother's lap and also clearly confused and annoyed.

Mal started laughing. "Looks like you're going to have that talk sooner than you thought you would."

John sighed. "When a man and a woman love each other very much—"

Serin snorted, trying to hold back her laughter.

John sighed again. "The man," John paused looking for appropriate words. It was clear that everyone was hanging on his words but for very different reasons than Joan and Sam were.

"We shouldn't lie to her when she asks us questions," mocked Cortana, clearly attempting to imitate her husband's lower voice. "Bet you're regretting that one right now, you're on your own, let's go Chief, get explaining."

"Yeah Dad, I wanna know," insisted Joan.

"'Splain Uncle John," prodded Sam.

"I know, let me think for a second, I want to make sure I explain properly," he glared at his wife while she snickered.

"I don't think you want to explain it the way we were taught," added Naomi. She thought back to their biology lessons and how extremely clinical they were, it was kind of strange.

"The man has a seed and the mom has an egg, the man puts the seed in the mom and the egg and the seed turn into a baby inside of the mom's belly," he explained carefully.

Joan and Sam nodded, so far so good.

"Then the baby grows for nine months inside of the mom and when the baby is ready, the baby comes out," he said calmly as if he were explaining something like the alphabet or how to spell one's name.

Sam nodded. "But how does the seed get to the egg?"

Cortana tried to hold back her laughter but it wasn't working. Mal was nearly in tears and even Naomi was highly amused.

"Very carefully Samantha," said John simply.

"Did mom like it?" asked Joan suspiciously.

Mal sprayed orange juice everywhere, out of his nose and all over the table as he collapsed into a fit of laughter.

"I would like to think so, it seemed like it at the time," said John calmly glancing at Cortana.

Cortana was also laughing, her hand on her forehead. Even she was a little flushed with embarrassment when usually she was pretty cavalier about such matters.

"Cortana are you going to comment on that one?" asked Serin, raising an eyebrow.

"I could brag but I wouldn't want you all to witness the Master Chief blushing, I think John has pretty much got this one covered."

"Who's the Master Chief?"

Everyone looked at Joan who had asked a relatively innocent question.

John felt his heart beat a little more quickly.

I don't want to talk about it.

Cortana looked at him. He had gone pale and was exhibiting symptoms of panic, something she had very seldom seen him do.

"Weren't you just asking your daddy about babies?," Kelly asked nervously.

The tension in the air immediately let up.

"Right, so you and Mom decided you wanted to be a mom and dad so you had me?"

"Well, you were a bit of a surprise, but we were so, so happy when you came to us," he explained softly.

Joan smiled warmly.

"I'm happy to be here too Dad," she stretched. "I have some important things to do today," she continued, seemingly satisfied with his explanation of human reproduction.

"Oh really?," said Cortana, clearly amused with what her daughter deemed to be important tasks.

"Mmhhh, Sammy and I need to keep playing the hopscotch and with the games in back yard that the Admril got for us."

John thought it was funny how she referred to Serin as "the Admiral." He didn't think she really understood what an Admiral was, she may have thought it was her name.

"Oh yes, that is of very high importance, you better get dressed and go do that," said Kelly.

"I can take them," she said. Joan hopped down and Sam with her, the two of them running towards the tent for their clothes with Kelly

following after.

There was a beat of silence.

"I am sorry, I know I'm being an immature asshole but that was the funniest thing I have ever seen, I don't care if you beat the shit out of me for saying so it was worth it," said Mal, still trying to wipe orange juice out of his nostrils.

"For once Mal you're not being an ass, I'm going to remember that until the day I die," agreed Serin as she refilled her coffee mug.

"I think it's good," commented Naomi. Everyone looked at her.

"I think it's good that you make a point of not lying her herâ€"we were lied to far too much and the damage was great and lasting. Because Halsey," she clearly tried to be calm while she said her name but only had mild success, "told me that my father abandoned me to be a Spartan of his own volition, I spent my entire adult life feeling betrayed and abandoned, intensely paranoid of people leaving me and leaving others behind," she inhaled to calm herself a little more. "The point is, you shouldn't avoid questions just because they are difficult," she continued.

John nodded. "Children are very capable of knowing when they are being lied to. Joan is very perceptive. I don't want her to have any reason not to trust Cortana or myself. It would be bad to have her think that Cortana and I are not truthful with her. Because she trusts us, if she does something like run toward the street and I yell for her to stop, she does because she trusts that I have a reason. The most important component in any type of relationship is trust. I trust Cortana to not lie to me and she knows I don't lie to her so I don't see why we would be any different to our daughter."

Fred looked at Naomi.

"That's really horrible Naomi, I'm sorry," he said.

She shrugged. "It's not your fault, I don't know why you're apologizing," she half snapped. Vaz looked at her, trying to tell her to calm down a little. She sighed.

"I'm sorry. I'm still very often defensive when I speak of these things."

"It's understandable," commented John.

"For someone who very often deals in lies and deception, I value nothing more than the truth," said Serin seriously. "People don't get away with lying to Serin Osman. If they do, it's usually because I let them."

John thought of Sarah Palmer lying to her about Halsey. He was sure that the Admiral had seen through that. It benefited her to preserve Lasky's careerâ€"he was a good officer.

"You still scare me when you make your Admiral face," muttered Mal. Serin looked at him with said 'Admiral face' and he visibly

shuddered.

"I think it's something about my eyebrows, they're thick and imposing," she mused.

Serin cleared her throat awkwardly. "What were you planning today?"

"We promised the girls a trip to the beach, we would love it if you all came along, then we could part ways," said Kelly, still a little shaken from Naomi's rather truthful observation.

"That sounds really fun, I haven't gotten some sun in a while," said Naomi. "I'm not sure if I even have a swimsuit aside from my Navy issued one but I don't even know where it is and the elastic was starting to give out," she mused.

"I have one you could borrow but I think it's from when I was stationed in the Pacific so it's a little," she laughed, "well, you'll see."

Naomi shrugged. "Whatever, I'm not particularly fashion conscious."

Everyone busied themselves packing up and getting prepared for a trip to the beach.

Naomi was busy packing a bag for herself and Vaz when Serin knocked on her door and came in.

"Here's my extra swimsuit," she said tossing her a bright magenta bundle.

Naomi's eyes widened when she held the pieces out in front of her.

"Where's the rest of it?"

"That's it," she said.

Naomi sighed.

"What in the world were you doing in the Pacific?"

Serin sighed. "I spent a term of OCS in the Pacific learning how to gather intel under cover and assimilating into the population, I got put in the Pacific because I'm tan, blend in, so honestly I spent a lot of time on the beach drinking margaritas," she chuckled. "It's an art learning to gather intel with a constant buzz going, people would know something was up if I didn't have a drink in my hand so yeah, it was a pretty fun tour."

Naomi sighed. "Do you at least have something I can cover up with on the way to the beach?"

"Yeah, here you go," she tossed an off white entirely see through garment at her. Naomi rolled her eyes.

"Thank you Serin, thank you very much."

"Anytime Naomi, anytime."

Naomi sighed and stared at the swimsuit on her bed as if it were some terrible enemy. She took off her clothes and pulled on the bottoms.

The door opened behind her and she quickly covered her chest with her arms.

"Ah, I'm sorry I didn't know you were up here," Vaz said, his forearm over his eyes. "I'll come back in a minute-"

"No, it's fine, it's really not a big deal," said Naomi, her cheeks a little flushed. She slowly let her arms down.

Vaz uncovered his eyes but just looked at the ground while she put the swimsuit top on, making sure she tied it tightly in all the places it needed tying. She groaned and ran her hands over her stomach insecurely.

Vaz's eyes widened when he stopped looking at the ground and looked at Naomi.

She frowned and crossed her arms.

"I know, I look stupid but I really want to go to the beach," she frowned even more and picked up the sheer cover up and put it on. She looked down at how little it did and groaned.

Vaz shook his head.

"No, um, you don't look stupid," he cleared his throat and shifted his weight awkwardly.

She glared.

"Really, you look fine."

"Really?" She asked bashfully.

"You look," he sighed and glanced her up and down, "I'm glad I saw you up here first so I didn't end up embarrassing myself in front of everyone," he muttered.

She raised an eyebrow.

"I'm going to go put compression shorts underneath my trunks," he said grabbing them out of his dresser drawer and head to the bathroom.

"You know you can change in front of me, right? I've seen you naked, I've seen plenty of people naked, you won't upset me or anything," she said as she started to put things like sunscreen into their bag.

He shrugged. "I just didn't want to assume anything or make you uncomfortable." He took off his pants and Naomi couldn't help but glance over at him, largely out of curiosity.

He saw her very clearly look at his groin and look away, her cheeks

flushed red.

"I'm sorry, I'm a little...excited. There was this morning where you took me by surprise then the bikini-"

"Should I not do things like that anymore?" She genuinely sounded worried that she had done something wrong.

He pulled up his swim trunks and shook his head.

"No, no it's fine. More than fine," he paused. "I don't want you to feel that you need to do anything. I don't want you to feel pushed into anything."

Naomi smiled softly. She grabbed his hand and sat down on the bed. He sat across from her and grasped her hand.

"I'm very...I'm very glad that you're understanding, but I think we should talk about just what my situation is. The procedures performed on me when I was fourteen seem normal to me, I forget that what exactly was done is classified and certainly not common knowledge. I haven't communicated exactly what you're dealing with," she sighed.

"I have a lot of things from gene therapy to retinal implants, but for now, what concerns our relationship is my catalytic thyroid implant."

He nodded for her to continue.

"It's a tiny platinum pellet that contains a human growth hormone catalyst that is implanted in my thyroid. It boosts the growth of skeletal and muscle tissues which is why we're all so tall," she paused, thinking of her words. "The most common side effect amongst all of us is a suppressed sex drive. Some of the hormones that facilitate a physical urge for sex are very low in me, but because I am a woman, these things vary depending on the time of the month. I still ovulate, get a period went through puberty etcetera," she stopped when she caught herself rambling.

"What I'm trying to say is that while I may never easily have an orgasm or be tearing off your clothes when you get home," he chuckled, "it doesn't diminish my desire to be close with you or to have intimacy with you. I will...admit that it's sometimes difficult for me to be vulnerable the way that physical intimacy requires, but that's not hormonal. That's because my body has been used by other people for their own purposes for my entire life. It has nothing to do with you, and being able to trust you with myself has been...very important to me, more important than I could ever express to you. I'm not saying that I'm ready to," she averted her eyes bashfully, "have sex right now, and I can't really promise that I ever will be, but I want you to know that I trust you and I want to trust more of myself with you. I want to be close with you and I'm not afraid of that."

He smiled and put his hand on her cheek.

"Thank you for being honest with me."

"I love you Vasya," she whispered softly.

"I love you too."

She leaned in and kissed him more firmly than she usually would, trying to muster a little more confidence. She liked how kissing him felt. It was still strange to her and still something of a novelty. She didn't understand why it made her feel so comforted and so cared for. She liked his stubble even if it was terribly out of regulations and he sometimes got glared at around base for how seldom he was clean shaven. She felt him reach for the end of her braid and pull the hair tie. He made quick work of it and buried his hand in her hair.

She heard him groan and press himself against her. He seemed like he was handling her a little bit less like glass. She felt him pull her hair slightly and she was surprised that it felt nice—"something about his grip and how she could sense how he was swept up in the moment from his frantic movement made her feel not only good but more in control than she sometimes felt.

"God," he murmured against her neck. "I love your hair," he rumbled. She laughed and pulled him closer to her a little rougher than she intended and clutched his t-shirt tightly. She smiled, her nose against his.

"I just like you," she said grinning and kissing him again. She felt him smile as he continued to kiss her and run his hand through her hair. She put his hand underneath the superfluous beach cover up and onto her breast like she had earlier this morning but this time he didn't pull his hand back and panic.

I like this, I like him touching me, she thought excitedly. It was surreal, she didn't know if this is what everyone felt when they were with someone but something about the unknown, something about the danger to it was exhilarating for her. It was definitely nerve wracking and somewhat terrifying, but she could feel his excitement and somehow that made her feel excited.

The door swung open.

Naomi yelped and Vaz swore loudly, his hand still very clearly up her shirt and her hair a mess.

"Hey guys everyone's ready to get oh Christ," he closed his eyes and covered them with his hand, "I'm—"fuck, I'm leaving," stuttered Mal quickly.

Mal stomped down the stairs his eyes still shut tightly and he tripped down the last few steps nearly running into a wall.

"Mal are you still drunk?" asked Serin skeptically.

"No, I fucking wish I was though," he groaned.

John, Cortana, Kelly and Fred looked at the clearly upset ODS.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes.

"I just fucking walked in on Vaz and Naomi and I mean like, not just nice Naomi type stuff where she holds his hand or lets him kiss her

on the cheek all sweet-like, his hand was up her shirt and they looked all hot and bothered and the image is burned into my mind," he gagged.

"Mal you can't just walk into people's bedrooms," Serin said condescendingly.

"Yeah I know that but I wasn't thinking and it's Naomi, ugh."

"Naomi is a woman Mal," said Cortana smartly.

"Gah I know but she's like my sister, I love Vaz but if he does anything to her I will fucking cut off his balls and string them up as a warning."

Kelly frowned. "Naomi is a strong, intelligent woman. She can look after herself."

Mal looked at her and Serin knew he was about to say something very rash.

"Look, Kelly, John, Fred, all of you, it's great to see you here for Naomi and the Admiral, and I know you're all mates and go way back to when you were getting shot at as kids, but I've seen Naomi go through some really serious shit, and I've also had the bloody piss beaten out of me by her father for her, which I don't know if you can imagine it but he was one scary dude, loads of rage and strong as an ox for an old dude. I even took a literal chunk out of a guy's arm with my own teeth for her. I love that woman like my own flesh and blood. I know you must care for her but she's Kilo-5, she's ours. I have done things for that woman that would get me kicked out of the UNSC and put into prison for life. I love Vaz too, but because I love the both of them I gotta keep an eye out for Naomi," he said firmly.

Kelly opened her mouth then closed it, a little lost for words. It was strange for her to see this outsider know the Spartans so well. It almost made her angry but another part of her felt glad that Naomi had had so many people looking out for her. It was strange, being as physically strong as a Spartan and having someone so comparatively fragile looking out for you. Kelly had never had that kind of experience but John must be familiar with the scenario. She wondered if it was unsettling or comforting.

Mal felt a hand on his shoulder.

"I love you too Mal, but please, please, knock on my door from now on, okay?" she said softly.

He sighed and put his hand on hers. "Lesson learned, lesson learned." He grinned mischievously, "But y'know, be safe kids, wrap it up, all of that."

Before Vaz could Serin smacked him upside the head with an open palm.

"Ow, that smarts," he rubbed his head.

"Yeah, yeah keep whining you deserve it," Serin drawled, picking up her beach bag.

* * *

><p>Hope you enjoyed, don't know when next one will be but please review, it means the world to me!<p>

36. Chapter 36

Ugh I have been trying to upload this forever but my ratchet desert internet is giving me crap.

Okay, to the anonymous reviewer who posted the long review, I simply HAVE to respond to what you said I'm so moved.

The fact that you thought I portrayed PTSD ridden individuals well is an honor to me. I started writing this story to deal with being drugged and raped in the military in addition to my first desert deployment and the mess that it left me as a person. This story is what got me through some of my darkest moments and I am so, so happy that you think I've done a good job. Naomi, in particular is honestly, for me a metaphor on dealing with things like sexual assault, because sexual assault is really about control and power, something that Naomi had none of. When people review this story and they're like "GO BACK TO THE CHIEF" and stuff it's really hard for me because honestly writing Naomi is a lot of the struggle that I personally have been through in the last year. (No, she's not some mary-sue self insert of myself obviously, I keep her pretty in character, I feel, but we both have a lot of the same problems and issues). There is a LOT of her coming up and I know it's gonna piss some people off but what I have written of her is honestly some of the best stuff I've ever written so people will deal. Thank you so, so much for your kind words, it really warmed my heart. If that was the only review this story received, I would be happy forever. (That doesn't mean don't ever review again but yeah. Lol!). I'm also glad you liked how I portrayed her and her resentment towards Halsey. I didn't want to make each Spartan have the same opinion. They're all different people and I think Naomi was much more hurt by Halsey in some ways, or at least she felt like she was. It's interesting to me and I wanted to explore the different feelings. Kelly and Fred are kinda on the "we don't give a fuck" side of the spectrum, Naomi wants her dead and John is in the middle (if it's a spectrum).

With that long and kinda personal review response, here's the next chapter. Thank you so much for your patience and reviewing. The hours here are long and exhausting, I don't get much sleep because it's loud, but when you guys review and I get to read them it makes me so, so happy.

* * *

><p>"Beach, beach, beach, beach, BEACH!" sang Joan excitedly running back from outside where she and Sam seemed to have been pacing outside the car in excitement.<p>

She continued to sing that same song as they drove to the beach. John swore that he had just started blocking the chatter out.

They parked and Joan started kicking, barely able to contain her excitement.

Cortana couldn't help but laugh. "You're a really excited little girl."

She giggled and shouted her agreement.

John grabbed the blankets and their various beach accessories.

"I want to carry something too," Joan whined.

Serin and Naomi walked up to their car and waited for them to get their things together.

"You can carry something if you don't whine like that," reprimanded John.

Joan sighed and rolled her eyes.

"May I please carry something?" she said dramatically.

"No, not with that attitude, you need to be polite," said Cortana.

"Yeesh, you guys are tough," commented Serin dryly.

"She knows that John is a softie and she can get pretty much anything she wants from him and knows to take me a little more seriously, I'd like to keep it that way as long as I can," said Cortana sardonically.

"May I please carry something?" she asked more politely.

John handed her an umbrella that was at least double her height somewhat carelessly.

The little girl hefted it over her shoulder and smiled, happy to feel like she was doing something.

"Kelly where did you get Sam's swim suit it's the cutest thing I've ever seen," cooed Cortana as she spread out their large beach blanket.

It was a little one piece that was white with polka dots and blue anchors all over it.

"It was a gift from one of my squadmates on fireteam Kronos that I met up with a few days ago, I think they got it on base, see Sammy has anchors for the Navy, yaaay!," she cheered and Sam clapped her hands excitedly.

"Okay girls, come over here," said Cortana.

"Go to Aunt Cortana she has sun screen for you," Fred said to Sam.

Cortana sprayed them down and instructed them to wait five minutes until they went swimming.

Kelly took off her wrap to reveal a somewhat edgy and rather revealing one piece swimsuit with chunks cut out of it on the sides.

It wrapped around her neck but had a deep cut out between her breasts that Serin had to admireâ€"it was without a doubt a suit intended to be sexy.

Serin whistled. "Damn, Kelly that is one hell of a swimsuit."

Kelly smiled. "Thanks, I found it a few blocks from John and Cortana's place in New York and I couldn't pass it up, it's so weird, I like how it covers up the worst part of my burn on my shoulder but it has an open back so I can get some sun," she twirled around.

Naomi was still feeling a little pouty about her swimwear options. She looked at Serin who was wearing a reasonable, green two piece tankini.

"Why couldn't I wear that swimsuit and you wear this skimpy magenta monstrosity?" she sighed, begrudgingly taking off the sheer cover up.

Serin scoffed. "Because I'd fall out of it, I bought that when I was pretty fresh off of the Spartan program, I've gained plenty of weight since then, filled out other places, it's in the best interest of everybody that I don't wear that suit."

"I understand that, since I had Joan my ass has never been the same," Cortana sighed dramatically. She smiled softly at Naomi and handed her some sunscreen. "You look nice Naomi, don't worry about it."

After sun screening himself, John scooped Joan up and ran towards the ocean, Joan kicking and giggling the whole way.

"Ooh," Cortana gasped when she watched John throw Joan very high up into the air and catch her in the water.

"I really don't like it when he throws her that high," she said anxiously.

"Eh, she'll be fine," said Kelly.

"You see I know that rationally but the mother in me just keeps going 'no, no stop that!'" she chuckled.

Everyone ended up swimming.

Joan loved swimming. She liked to pretend she was a little fish. She could swim by herself now but liked to stay close to Dad and where she could touch. The water was salty but it was exciting. She had to wear a floaty belt that she didn't really care for but it was okay.

"Mom!" she called.

"Yes sweetheart?"

"Watch me do a trick!" she yelled excitedly.

"Okay I'm watching," she said looking at her.

"Dad come help," she demanded.

"Which trick do you want to do," he asked.

"The one where I stand on your shoulders," she whisperedâ€"she wanted it to be a surprise.

He crouched down underwater and Joan put her feet on his shoulders. When she was ready, he stood up to his full height.

"Look Mommy!"

Cortana felt her heart beat quickly, seeing Joan that high up and on top of her towering father's shoulders.

"That's great sweetie," she said nervously.

_She's fine, she's fine, there's water if she falls she's okay.

—

Joan giggled.

"Dad I'm taller than you!"

"Yes you are, what's the weather like up there?" he joked.

"Sunny," she looked around for their friends swimming.

"Dad I wanna jump to the man who talks funny."

He frowned. "That's rude Joan, he just has an accent because English isn't his first language. People can talk differently," he explained. "His name is Mr. Beloi, you should ask him if you can jump to him, shout at him," he coached.

"Mr. Beloi!," she shouted. The man looked up at her. "I'm going to jump to you!"

"No Joan you should askâ€"

Too late. She jumped, yelling and laughing while she did and John watched Vaz's eye's widen with shock and heard him say something in Russian as he moved to catch Joan.

Joan bobbed underwater and Vaz pulled her up. She wrapped her arms around his neck and giggled, wiping her hair out of her eyes.

"That was so fun!" she splashed excitedly with one hand and kept another wrapped around his neck.

"I'm sorry," sighed John.

"No, it's fine you're a little _rybka_ aren't you?"

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's a fish, just like The Golden Fish," he said, thinking about one of his favorite childhood stories.

"Okay, let's play pretend, Sam come over," she called.

Naomi watched Vaz and Mal play an elaborate game of pretend with the children, along with John and Cortana. Cortana was rather theatrical, pretending to be whatever the girls demanded for their scenario. It was sweet to see them having fun.

Serin laid on the beach with her eyes closed. She loved the sun on her skin and the dark tan she got with it.

"Why don't I do this more, I live in Sydney, this is fantastic," she sighed.

"Because you're busy, I have your schedule memorized," said Naomi thoughtfully.

Serin moved to her side and propped herself up on her elbow.

"How are you holding up Naomi?" she asked softly.

Naomi sighed. "I'm okay. I'm glad that we did this, I'm glad we had everyone over. It's frustrating for me because Fred and Kelly are just so—" she struggled for words.

"Willingly oblivious?" supplied Serin sarcastically.

"Exactly," agreed Naomi.

"They drank the same kool-aid we did growing up, they just don't want to shake it off. They're happy and that's what matters to them. It's not right or wrong, it just is."

"I know you're right. I just...I guess I feel envious of them, they weren't forced to confront their past like I was," she commented.

"But you met your father. You got to see where you got your eyes and hair from, and more importantly you know that someone in the world has loved you, loved you more than words can express. No one can take that away from you, not me, not Halsey, it's yours," said Serin.

Naomi sighed. She'd told herself that at least a hundred times but the sharp pain she felt made it difficult to remember. She felt grief whenever she thought of her father.

"I know. It's just hard, it's still hard every day. I wonder if I should have went with him, if I would have been happy with him. There are so many things I wish I had done, I wish I had let him hold me and I wish I remembered how he smelled, how his hands felt. I was just too shocked to even do anything like that and now I'll never get the chance again," she whispered.

"I'm happy, happier than I've ever been but simultaneously so angry and so, so sad," she finished.

"That's normal, it's all been a crazy couple of years to process. But you will, and we're here for you."

Naomi looked at Fred, Kelly and John.

"You know, as much as I do love them and will always care about them, I am so thankful for Kilo-5. I'm thankful that I have you all. It's different. I feel more like I chose to make you my family whereas the other Spartans were made my family through terrible shared experience," she chuckled. "I know you understand, I know you're a Spartan but you just get how I feel about the whole thing. I don't know how you do it, how you remain so strong."

Serin scoffed. "It's not easy and I'm not always strong. You hear me sometimes at night I'm sure."

Naomi did. Usually once a month she could hear her wake up screaming in her sleep, panicking and yelling until she woke herself up.

"Fact of the matter is it's not always easy but you do what you have to do," she said.

"I understand," she agreed. She reached over and put some more sunscreen on her pale stomach.

"You're getting some looks, surprised Vaz hasn't come over here to glare at people," Serin said raising an eyebrow.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Here, watch that group of college guys walk past us," she nodded her head at a group of five or so guys carrying beach towels and a cooler.

Naomi watched as they walked past and sure enough, one saw her out of the corner of his eye and did a double take, hit his friend on the shoulder and gestured at her, the friend looked and glanced at her from over his sunglasses.

Naomi frowned as they walked away.

"It's that 'hot Swedish model bod,' I'm telling you," she said sarcastically.

"The funny thing is, I know that if Vaz was over here they wouldn't look twice," chuckled Serin.

The notion was ridiculous to Naomi. She was more than capable of kicking anyone's ass.

"Whatever, men are stupid," she grumbled. She flipped onto her stomach. Serin chuckled

"What?," she said, clearly irritated.

"I just don't think that's going to help your cause," she said glancing at her muscular back and shapely backside.

Naomi groaned.

"After today I'm going to go and buy the frumpiest swimsuit I can find so I can enjoy myself at the damn beach."

"Psh, enjoy the beach today, there are worse things than being hot, Vaz doesn't stop looking at you," she teased.

Naomi swatted at Serin and she chuckled.

"What, are you embarrassed, I know Mal saw more than he wanted this morning."

Naomi groaned and buried her face in her hands.

"Who knew that all of this stuff was so complicated?," she lamented.

"People are difficult, I'm in the business of understanding people and I tell you it can be hard to keep up," she agreed.

"I just didn't expect to care this much or to want this. I went my entire life without anyone, without a kiss or even a casual touch from anyone and now I just feel weird. I'm not like Kelly or Fred where you can tell they can hardly keep their hands off each other," the way she said it sounded like she was a little nauseated at the concept, "but I just like it. I like the attention and that kind of scares me."

"Naomi, I think that's pretty normal. It's probably the most normal thing you've ever worried about so don't overthink it. Enjoy it, you deserve it," she sipped at some lemonade.

"Have you had a boyfriend?," asked Naomi.

The fact that she even felt comfortable asking this was not only indicative of how much she had changed since leaving the military but how much her relationship with Serin had changed. She had truly become her closest friend and confidant as opposed to her commanding officer. It was a casual topic, but Naomi wasn't used to asking people questions of a personal nature.

Serin shrugged. "If you could call it that, I went through a somewhat rebellious phase. Like I said last night, sex was never anything that great for me but I think I did it to feel in control of myself, feel like I had choices and because I could. No one was breathing down my neck telling me what to do or what not to do. There was a guy on my first assignment that I liked, we'd sleep together, get food together and stuff like that, then he got himself killed and I stopped really getting to know anyone I slept with, made things too difficult. Then when I started getting promoted and hit my thirties I just stopped doing that kind of thing, didn't see much of a point to it."

"Do you...do you think it will be that way for me?," she asked quietly. She felt nervous speaking like this, speaking more in terms of the inevitability of her having sex with Vaz than in terms of if, like she always had. It was so difficult for her to imagine it, but as her relationship with Him developed she knew that it was something she wanted more and more every day. It was something deep within her that wanted closeness with him, she just didn't understand why, how, or what it would be like and it was absolutely terrifying.

Serin shook her head slightly.

"Nah, you love Vaz and he loves you. I'm sure it's different with someone who loves you. That's why people do things like get married and have a ton of babies or whatever," she gestured to John and

Cortana who were getting splashed by Joan and laughing.

Naomi sighed. "What if I'm terrible at it? Vaz hasâ€¦|" she searched for words, "been with plenty of other women, what if I'm not like them or...I don't know, what if he laughs at me?" The words flew out of her quickly and irrationally, her worry evident in her tone.

Serin snorted. "I don't know when you're planning on taking the plunge so to speak but those are absurd worries," she watched Naomi frown and she let up a little. "I know it's scary but just know you don't have to do anything you don't want to."

Naomi frowned even more. "I know that. Vasya is almost too careful with me. He often views me as fragile, and I don't blame him, I have been pretty fragile for a lot of the time he has known me but I am capable of making decisions."

"I think he feels like you deserve to be treated kindly and taken care of for once in your life, which is true. You do deserve those things."

Naomi turned back on her back and rested on her forearms. She thought of him and his rare smiles, the way he looked at her, the almost reverent way he would run his hands over her body, his breathing when he slept, how he held her if she had a nightmare, how he was vulnerable with her and told her about things that haunted him and how fiercely he would defend her to anyone. It made a warm feelings spread through her, starting from her chest and overwhelming the rest of her until she couldn't help but smile. "You're right. He's...he's really a special person."

He is my special person.

"Mom, Dad watch, I'm a puppy dog!," exclaimed Joan. She went to the shore where the water was only skimming the sand and shook herself off, imitating a dog.

"Can you bark like a dog?," asked Cortana. Joan started pretending to bark and walked around on all four of her limbs with surprising agility.

After she was done playing puppy dog she decided that she wanted to play in the sand.

"Sammy, let's go dig a big hole!"

"Okay," agreed Sam, walking clumsily out of the water.

John and Cortana followed the girls out of the ocean while Kelly and Fred kept swimming and making what Joan aptly referred to as "smoochy face," at one another.

Cortana sat down next to the Admiral after she had towed off and watched as Sam and Joan started digging their big hole with their hands.

"Are they always like that?," asked Serin uncomfortably looking at Fred and Kelly.

Cortana snickered. "You know, I never noticed it before but after spending some time apart I've realized they're pretty touchy. Yeah, I think they're pretty much always this way but they also didn't take a real honeymoon or anything. Last vacation they took was to Reach for that feature story on them and Kelly was massively pregnant. There also isn't much to do on Reach yet, so I think this is a good excuse for them to have a good time."

"They're pretty disgusting," commented John, sitting down and handing Cortana something to drink.

"Ooh, thank you," she said excitedly sipping the icy drink. "This tastes better than the one I had on our honeymoon, this is great!"

"Where did you two go?"

"Oh we just stayed at the resort we got married at for a few days. I was pretty pregnant and crabby when we got married but it was really nice. Did you want to see some pictures?" she asked.

"Sure," Naomi said. Cortana pulled out her tablet and searched for their wedding photos.

"Here we are," she said after a minute of looking. She handed the tablet to Serin. Naomi leaned over to glance at the pictures.

"That's me and Kelly at the salon getting all done up," Cortana chuckled. She was gesturing animatedly while she talked with the hairdresser and Kelly looked uncomfortable as she slouched in the chair so she could get her hair cut.

Cortana continued to scroll past one of her and Catherine standing together in their hotel room, smiling.

"Go back," asked Serin. Cortana sighed and did as she asked.

Cortana was smiling anxiously. The doctor had a small smile on her face.

"Your dress is very beautiful, Cortana," said Naomi calmly.

"Thank you, I really loved it, the material was so soft," she said quietly.

"Hmm, Halsey looks kind of human in this picture, almost like she could care about someone besides herself," Serin said sarcastically.

"She was weird that day. I think I remind her of Miranda or at least what she imagines a relationship with Miranda would've been like," she shook her head, trying to dismiss the awkwardness the entire thing made her feel. "Whatever, anyways, look at this one," she flicked to a picture of Kelly and John.

"This is one of my favorites, look at her she's so beautiful," Cortana smiled.

Naomi smiled. "I like her dress too."

"Oh yeah, Kelly has really great style, she's always putting something fun together, she spent a whole day shopping when she got here," mused Cortana.

"Check this one out," she flicked to a photo of John and the Arbiter standing together, talking by the waterfall at the ceremony site.

"You had the Arbiter at your wedding?"

Cortana nodded. "It was some paperwork but it was worth it, I think he really enjoyed it and these photos are priceless."

There was a photo of her and John holding hands as they said their wedding vows and a photo of him leaning down to kiss her.

Naomi stared at the photo. It was a little strange to see John in that way, to see him getting married and so clearly in love the way he seemed in some of these photos.

"This next one is probably my favorite," Cortana flicked to the photo. Their wedding guests stood up around them clapping and John was carrying her, her dress had hiked up to her knees and tightened a little around her stomach making her baby bump more visible. Most notable of all was how they looked at each other. Serin could just tell how happy they were and how in love they were.

"Look at my baby bump," Cortana laughed pointing at her stomach. She sighed and looked at her daughter who had moved onto building a sand fortress with Samantha and Mal.

"You look so happy," said Naomi softly.

Cortana smiled. "We were. We are," she chuckled. "He's a pretty okay guy," she put her hand affectionately on his leg and smiled at him.

"You're tolerable, I suppose," said John lightly.

"Do you have any more pictures?" asked Naomi.

"You kidding? Fred doesn't stop taking photos, probably took a hundred photos last evening. John actually took a few of these though," she scrolled in the tablet looking for a specific album.

"Here we are," she tapped the album.

Naomi gasped slightly at the photo. Cortana had clearly moments ago had a baby, she had blood and sweat all over her, her hair was going every which way and she was clearly weeping but also smiling. The most shocking part of the photo was John—he looked like he was about to cry, his eyes were shiny as he kissed Cortana on her temple.

Naomi looked at John who was also leaning and looking at the picture.

"You cried?," she asked.

He looked at the picture more closely. "I did," he said softly. "There's nothing I've ever experienced that compares to seeing your child born," he looked over to Joan who was currently scavenging for sea shells to adorn the sand fortress.

"I just can't imagine you crying," said Naomi quietly.

John shrugged. "I love my daughter. Raising her is the most important task I've undertaken."

Serin was overwhelmed by how raw the photo was, how truly human. It was an event that took place every minute of every day but never seemed to lose its miraculous quality.

Cortana kissed him quickly on the cheek.

"Then look at these," she flicked to a few photos of Joan after she had been cleaned up. One was of Cortana holding her, one of her feeding Joan and a few just of Joan.

"John took those ones, and I took these ones," she flicked forward a few more for photos of John holding her. His facial expression was solemn and stern but seemed very emotional at the same time.

"Wow, she's so tiny," sighed Naomi.

"Yeah look at this one," she flipped to a photo of Joan's tiny little hand in John's huge palm that was at least five times larger than hers.

"That's amazing," said Serin. "For someone who finds the entire notion of childbirth absolutely terrifying and disturbing on many levels, I think these photos are pretty neat."

"This one of Kelly is really sweet," Cortana searched for the photo and pulled it up.

"Wow, she really was huge," commented Serin.

"Oh yeah, giant but easily the most beautiful pregnant woman you'd ever see, she could still walk and move around easily, smiled all the time and just glowed. She had Sam about two weeks later, and here's a picture of me pregnant," she scrolled and found a picture of John rubbing her feet while she ate ice cream out of the carton. Naomi and Serin both laughed.

"And that was basically every day of the last trimester of my pregnancy. If that picture isn't sufficient birth control I don't know what is," said Cortana sarcastically.

"This is my favorite picture," John said grabbing the tablet and pulling up a picture of Cortana and Joan, who looked about one, sleeping in a bed together. Cortana had her arms wrapped around her.

Cortana sighed. "I miss home."

"Me too," said John.

"What's it like where you live?" asked Naomi.

"Simple, our house is a lot smaller and we have tons of beautiful land surrounding us, we're just a short ride from Fred and Kelly, John has a workshop that he builds things in, we have a garden and we have all of John's medals and ribbons on a shelf. I miss little things like the glassware we got for our wedding and the bedframe that John built. Some things just feel like home. We're happy to be here and we're having a good time but there's something to be said for the seclusion of the Outer Colonies. Something about it is exciting, there's so much optimism to make things better," Cortana explained.

"You should come and visit us sometime, I think you would really like it, Naomi you could bring Vasily, we could make room, if you ever get the time or just want to get away you'll have to let us know," she looked at Serin, "You're obviously welcome but I'd assume you're far too busy for that type of thing."

"You would be correct, but if I'm ever in the system for work perhaps I'd be able to sneak away for a while," she said.

Cortana smiled. Having friends and acquaintances was nice for her.

"This is my favorite of you and Joan," said Cortana, grabbing the tablet and finding a picture of Joan making a silly, scrunched up face and John looking on somewhat stoically with the smallest of smiles on his face.

Naomi laughed. "Some things don't change."

"That's what happy John looks like, I know, overwhelming isn't it?" joked Cortana.

She turned off the tablet and sighed.

"We have a bunch more at home, when we go home we'll have to send you some, now that we have friends we should start sending out photos of Joan, she's growing so quickly," Cortana smiled.

"Please don't sell them to the press, I can see the headline, 'Sociopath Spartan Has Child, War Officially Over,'" John said sarcastically.

"You two have lived an amazing life together," commented Naomi softly.

"Never a dull moment," agreed Cortana.

* * *

><p>Okay, not quite sure where I want to go from here, I have like, 70k in Naomi stuff written but I've gotta bridge it with this stuff. We shall see what I end up doing, I have a couple things I would like to do with John and Cortana before they leave Earth. *shrug* anyways, I will see you all when I see you, thanks for reviewing, I really appreciate it. :)<p>

37. Chapter 37

I'm on R&R! So nice to be back to my bed...missed it more than I missed my husband honestly. Lol. I hope everything has been going well for you. I'm sorry I haven't responded to reviews, I'm going to try and get back to it but I've just been so exhausted since I got back. It was a short trip because we were just doing some backfill but man I forgot how much the desert fucking blows, place is a shithole.

* * *

><p>I need to go over this concept more thoroughly next lecture, everyone is getting number fifteen wrong.

Cortana wearily ran a hand through her hair. Fred and Kelly had been with them for two weeks, and while she loved having them, playing hostess was difficult. Even if they didn't expect to be entertained and were perhaps the easiest houseguests possible, she still felt pressure for them to have a good time and see parts of Earth. John, of course, didn't really see the point of things like this and made almost no effort to show them around anywhere. Between a toddler and her full-time professorship, she was feeling more than a little overworked.

It was late on Friday night—the rest of the house was already asleep, Joan and Sam put to bed hours prior and the superhuman Spartan half of the household was already snoozing away while she graded midterm examinations. She ground her teeth, an annoying habit she'd recently developed, as she sifted through the lengthy and complicated exam she'd administered.

And if I'm honest with myself, I'm sure most of my students are all drunk out of their minds having a great time on a Friday. They don't give a fuck about this midterm right now. _

On her fourth hour of grading, she'd finally completed the exams, she sighed and shut down her computer. She was far too revved up to sleep, so she went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine.

She ran her hands over the cool granite countertops, feeling more than a little anxious about life. Joan was growing faster than she and John could keep up, plowing through milestones as if they were a competition. Having Samantha, who was an extremely bright little girl in her own right, here for comparison threw the differences into sharp relief. Joan was simply more coordinated and could express herself more articulately than her may-as-well-be cousin could. In some ways, this was exciting. She couldn't help but feel overwhelming pride at the brilliant, wonderful individual her daughter was becoming. In other ways, it was nerve wracking.

Catherine stayed as far away from Earth as she possibly could, residing on an outer colony even less populated than the one Cortana resided. Cortana couldn't say that Catherine constantly _messaged her about Joan; no, it was far more calculated than that, far more deliberate, as if she messaged her about just _enough small-talk as to not arouse suspicion when she asked about how Joan was doing.

_How is your class? How is your research going? I worked with James Greenbow when I was doing a lecture series at Andromeda Crossing University, does he still have that nervous habit where he winks every thirty seconds? Has Joan started reading yet? _

Cortana quickly saw through it, she knew that Catherine wanted not only to understand but _study _Joan as she hit developmental milestones. The unbridled curiosity Cortana had inherited from the woman completely understood this desire. Joan was an anomaly, she was not only unique but _exceptional. _

That was what worried Cortana. She knew that Catherine couldn't help but view Joan as something of a science experiment, and that part of Catherine felt _entitled _to know about Joan. After all, she was directly responsible for both of Joan's parents, she viewed Cortana and John as her children, her life's work and greatest achievement. It was natural that she felt curiosity. It didn't mean that Cortana couldn't feel uncomfortable with the situation. She knew what the woman was capable of. She knew, in explicit detail, what had been done to John as a child not much older than Joan. She knew the part that Catherine had played in it. She couldn't resent her for it, she couldn't hate her for it, it gave her John, it gave her life and everything she held dear. But she could fear it, and fear it she did. She feared that part of Catherine, and even more, she feared that there was a part of herself capable of such things.

Seeing the broken mess that had become Naomi Sentzke last week had been unsettling. She wasn't like the other Spartans. She had periods of time where she just seemedâ€¦absent. She would stare off into space, almost as if she was lost in her own thoughts, not completely present in a room until something snapped her out of it, usually her boyfriend the surly but compassionate Russian ODST.

Seeing the very real fallout of the Spartan program, something besides the completely happy ending she and John had, unsettled her. It threw her for a loop, perhaps similar to the feeling people had when they lost their religion or learned a terrible secret.

Am I capable of such atrocities? Am I really all that different?

She shook her head, took a large gulp of her wine and felt a shiver up her spine.

_This is an amazing thing about being human. _

There were many things he loved about being human, and she particularly enjoyed a glass of wine when she was feeling overwhelmed.

_Sometimes it ends up being more like a bottle, though. _

She didn't bother corking the bottle and just took it with her to the living room. She set her glass and the bottle down on the coffee table and turned on the television. She did this mostly because she started to go a little crazy when she wasn't multitasking. She had to constantly be thinking about more than one thing at once. The ambient sound of music or a program could usually satisfy this need, but it was a need nonetheless.

She continued to drink entirely too much wine until she laid with her head spinning pressed into the couch cushion.

_Catherine doesn't want to hurt Joan, she loves Joan, who couldn't love Joan? _

_She loves John and she still did what she did. She loves me, and she made me yet she resigned me to the cruel fate of human love and attachment, the sick game that had been the seven year AI lifespan and the resignation that John would live on without me. She loved Miranda and Keyes, in some fashion, at least, and she'd abandoned themâ€|. _

Despite herself, she took another sip of wine.

_Will I abandon Joan like she abandoned Miranda? I can't, I couldn't. I love herâ€|. _

Cortana couldn't understand it. She couldn't understand how Catherine had made those choices. Now that she was a mother and she understood what it was like, the relationship between a mother and a child, the fact that Joan's first home had been her very _body, _that Joan was half her, and half John...she couldn't imagine being without her. Her dependence upon the child was overwhelming. She loved her daughter with a fierceness that couldn't be written off as biologyâ€"no, it was far more than that. It was both primal and logical, sensible and magical, tangible and completely incomprehensible. The simple _joy _she felt at the sound of Joan's laugh, her little voice saying "Mama" or "Papa," it unraveled her. She couldn't imagine a life without her.

_When did Joan start sleeping through the night? How high can she count? Have you thought about starting her early in school? Does she play well with other children? What are her favorite bedtime stories, I'd like to get her a few books to send. _

These were all normal questions had Catherine been something like a normal grandmother. In the moments Cortana could allow herself to imagine the relationship that way, it was easy.

_Her favorite color is blue. She likes anything with raspberry jam. Swimming is her new favorite activity. She drinks cups of milk and coffee with John in the morning. The way her eyes crinkle up when she laughs makes my heart stop right in my chest, the way she runs around like one of the big kids on the playground scares me more than anything. _

She couldn't supply her with these answers. The fact that she wanted to terrified her. She felt so lost, so nervous about raising such a wonderful, perfect soul and about messing her up. Catherine was the only thing she had even remotely like a mother. A woman who had kidnapped children and experimented upon them was her guiding maternal example.

_What in the world does this woman want with my child? _

She finished the bottle of wine and sluggishly walked to the guest bathroom, not wanting to wake John, and took a shower so hot it made her skin turn red and splotchy. She didn't bother to dry herself off and walked naked to her and John's room, tracking water the whole

way. She tried putting on her pajamas but it was difficult for her in the dark and she didn't want to wake John. She half sat half fell onto the bed and tucked herself into bed, the sheets sticking to her still wet legs.

Keep your friends close and enemies closer. Catherine has got to be one or the other, right?

* * *

><p>John felt uncomfortable in formalwear. Cortana told him that this hardly passed as formalwear, that it was simply "Artsy gallery chic," but it was more put together than anything he ever work. He rolled his shoulders uncomfortably. He'd convinced Cortana that he could wear a t-shirt under his button up because button up shirts were simply uncomfortable for him, but she'd won out when it came to khakis instead of blue jeans.<p>

John was frankly surprised at some of these photographs. There were photographs of seemingly mundane, unconnected things like mail, unwashed dishes, that somehow made sense together. The photos that really surprised John were, however, the ones of Kelly.

She had an entire wall devoted to her. Once again, he wasn't quite sure how Fred had taken the first photo of Kelly. She was walking out of a Pelican in full MJOLNIR armor, her helmet under her arm. She was bleeding from her temple but it was clearly nothing serious. There was so much chaos around herâ€"other Spartans being rushed to medical with critical injuries, flashing lights of hangar doors opening and closing, vehicles running around, yet she remained the focal point of the photo. The thing John found strange was her expression. It was...completely blank. She looked off into the distance at nothing in particular, her eyes straight forward, ready for whatever came next but not invested in any incarnation of the future.

The next photo was of her sitting on the couch, her hair in a ponytail and wearing a Navy t-shirt. On their coffee table were objects he recognized, Fred's knife, standard issue travel logs for documenting hours spent in cryosleep (now rendered somewhat obsolete), and other odds and ends that John recognized as strangely military but simultaneously useless, like a ribbon here, a setscrew there. Her expression was soft with far less intensity than the first photo that depicted the Spartan warrior he had known, but it was still a somewhat unsettling photo.

Next was a photo, this one in black and white, morning light filtering in through their bedroom window. John felt a little embarrassed looking at the photo. Kelly was clearly naked, a sheet wrapped around her and her hair down, her legs sticking out the bottom of the bed and he couldn't help but find the picture strangely beautiful. The simplicity, the normalcy of it next to the first two photos was almost shocking, she seemed like a completely different woman.

The next photo was also in their bedroom. It was larger than the other photos and she was sitting up on the bed, topless and wearing a pair of shorts. Her stomach was large and round, surely in her last month of pregnancy, her arms cradling her stomach. He looked at her abdomen and saw a bullet wound stretched out to at least double the size it had been originally fanning itself over her side, along with

a mix of lacerations stretching to accommodate her child. The surgical augmentation scars were visible on the smooth underside of her arms. The way the light was composed, it was clear that the juxtaposition of her pregnancy with her battle-worn body was the intention.

So strange.

Even though he knew Kelly was a mother, a wife, and a sister to him, the picture was strange. Even in pregnancy her body looked fit, hard, unyielding. Cortana had been all softness and femininity. It was very clear that Kelly's body hadn't been made for pregnancy.

It made John feel strange about himself, how he thought of their bodies in context of being 'made' and purpose instead of having bodily autonomy to do as one pleased. There was no other way to look at it though, their bodies had very clearly been crafted for a purpose, and that was to kill. Sure, you could say 'to protect Earth and her Colonies,' but in reality, they were made for destruction.

When John looked at the next picture, one in the hospital and Samantha nursing on Kelly's burned, skin-grafted left breast, Kelly's face one of pure adoration, he felt badly for his prior thoughts.

She wasn't made to be a mother, but she was meant to be one.

Kelly walked up behind him.

"People can't stop talking to Fred, people say his work pushes a lot of boundaries and misconceptions about the Spartan program," she glanced over at her bearded husband and John could tell she felt a lot of pride, "I'm really happy for him," she looked down and shuffled her feet awkwardly like she often did. "What do you think?"

"This is a really beautiful photo," he said after a moment.

He looked again at her scared shoulder and the baby, safe and content with her mother.

_How do we live in a world with so much suffering and yet so much love? _

John sighed.

I'll probably never know.

* * *

><p>"Admiral Osman is otherwise engaged at the moment. I can direct you to Commander Grant," she looked at the older officer as he grumbled and pouted like a child.<p>

"I've been in this Navy for thirty years and I can't get a word in with an Admiral a fraction of my age," he complained.

Naomi hated it when this happened. She looked younger than she was, so officers very often talked to her as if she had no idea what was

going on, like she was some half-wit assistant who hardly understood where she was and who she worked for.

If I actually gave a crap I'd shove my foot up your ass.

"Admiral Osman has served longer than you have, she simply looks youthful," said Naomi sternly.

Naomi watched the man flinch a minuscule amount. She had learned that many found her eye contact intimidating. Mal told her that her eyes were "kinda freaky." At first it had offended her, but now she just used it to whatever advantage she could. If it made obnoxious, entitled senior officers back down then she was fine with it.

Without another word the officer turned and went to the hallway she had pointed towards. She looked at the time on her watch and sighed.

_1715, time to go home. _

The day had seemed to go by so slowly and now that it was finally time to leave she felt anxious.

Tonight was the last night before Vaz deployed.

This will be good for his career, he'll sew on a stripe when he gets home and he's just running recon.

This was surely the fifth time she'd told herself that today. The fact that he had volunteered was difficult for her. He had asked her if he could go.

Even though she wanted to scream and say "No never leave," she knew she couldn't. She wanted what was best for him and for the UNSC as well.

She got in her car and went to the grocery store, purposely taking her time as she picked out ingredients for his favorite dinner.

She intended to make it a nice evening. Serin was in Africa for the weekend and Naomi was excited to have the house left to her and Vaz, even though she loved Serin's company and would never dream of living anywhere else.

She pulled up the drive and put the groceries in the kitchen. Then she went up to her bedroom and stared at the top drawer. She hadn't opened that drawer for months, and pathetically enough she still didn't really want to.

No. You promised yourself months ago that this was it. You can do this.

She inhaled shakily and put her hand on the drawer pull, opening the drawer slowly.

She stared for a moment at the drawer contents. After a moment, she finally pulled out a lacy bra and matching underwear.

She didn't know _why _she had bought them all those months ago, but

she could always feel their presence in that top drawer somehow. They were a beautiful shade of soft gray that she found appealing and they were soft. She laid them out neatly on her bed and took off her clothes.

She looked at herself in the full length mirror. Her current undergarments were no-nonsense to say the least. Her panties sat just below her bellybutton and were off white with a wide band of elastic that had seen better days. She wore a white bralette with no wire and thick straps.

She watched in the mirror as she brought her hand to her breast and pushed it upwards out of curiosity. She had never even _thought _about her breasts before she'd started dating Vaz. They existed and didn't really serve any purpose her entire life.

Then she realized that for Vaz, and for many men, they were an _obsession._ He would stare at them. He touched them. He kissed them. She was pretty sure he _thought _about them. She liked how it felt when he touched them just fine, but she liked his touch pretty much anywhere.

She took off the bralette and underwear and put on the delicate, lacy, grey set after removing the tags.

The panties sat far lower than she was used to, right over her hipbones. They were also a lot moreâ€¦_revealing,_ in the back, though not like the thongs she had eyed warily in the store.

The bra was even stranger. It honestly functioned more like...a tiny shelf for her breasts, pushing them up and providing cleavage she'd never had. She laughed out loud at how silly she felt.

This is a stupid article of clothing. She turned to the side and looked at her profile in the mirror, running her hand over her obliques and abdomen.

She pulled the band of the bra up a little bit, trying to get used to how it felt. She turned and looked at herself again. She pulled her hair out of its bun and shook it out and ran her hand through it a few times, pulling it over her shoulder.

He likes my hair this way. She smiled nervously as a warm, shy feeling came over herâ€"she could see the blush rising in her cheeks in the mirror. She felt very uncomfortable but slightlyâ€¦_sexy_, something she'd never really understood or thought about feeling.

She kind of liked it.

She grabbed a white tank top and a pair of black workout pantsâ€"she wasn't going to take this whole thing _too _far, she was still Naomi and didn't want to wear anything ridiculous after work, she liked to relax.

She walked back downstairs and started cooking dinner. She liked cooking, it was logical and intuitive at the same time. There was an order, there were ingredients but sometimes she added more of one thing, a little less of another and it was fun. She went and grabbed one of the nicer bottles of wine Serin had received as a gift from

the Australian prime minister.

"Ooh that is good," she sighed after taking a sip.

I suppose there need to be a few benefits to being one of the most powerful people in the galaxy.

She heard the door open as she was setting the table. Vaz was still in uniform. She really liked how he looked in uniform. It was something she hadn't appreciated at all until she had retired and wasn't wearing fatigues herself, but something about how well they fit him and even how he bloused his pants just made him look sharp. Sometimes she thought he looked more like the stereotypical image of a soldier than she did. He was strong and had a big scar on his face with his neat medium-reg haircut. She was muscular, yes, but she was also gangly and honestly a little awkward looking proportionally, or at least she thought so.

"Hello my zvezda," he said dropping his backpack unceremoniously on the ground with a loud thud.

She smiled. She loved when he called her that, his star. She leaned down and kissed him softly. She could tell he was surprised because he didn't kiss her back until right before she pulled away.

"Hi," she said softly, "dinner's almost done."

He looked at her. He expected a nice evening of them watching a movie and snuggling before he left tomorrow.

She is acting different.

She walked quickly to the kitchen and he saw that she had lit some candles. This was even stranger—"she didn't grow up with candles or sit down dinner or anything like that, so she usually didn't pick up on many societal norms or even pay attention to them, but she had clearly and very deliberately set up something like a dinner date for them.

He felt a little unsettled.

"Are you okay?"

She looked at him and raised an eyebrow, her hair whipping over her shoulder as she turned her head. "Yes, why wouldn't I be?"

He shook his head. "Nothing, you're right, let me go change and I'll be down for dinner, it smells wonderful," he said softly.

She had made his favorite dinner. He hadn't felt so special since he was a kid on his birthday.

"Naomi, that was amazing, I should deploy more often if I get meals like this."

She smiled. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, you deserve something special before it's nutrition packs and chow hall for months on end," she laughed.

"God bless the Corps," he said sarcastically.

She didn't even bother doing the dishes, she would do them...after. After he was gone.

_Stop that. Enjoy tonight. _

"Movie?," she smiled, feeling a little forced.

"Yeah," he agreed softly, observing her somewhat anxious tone.

They sat on the couch and she immediately wrapped her arms around him. She rested her head on his shoulder like she usually did.

She wasn't paying attention to the movie even though it seemed entertaining enough. No, she was paying attention to how he smelled and how it felt to rest her head on his chest—the place between his shoulder and chin was the perfect place for her on him, she fit perfectly and felt comforted. She wanted to remember how his hand felt in hers and how safe she felt in this moment.

She hadn't even noticed the movie had ended.

"Naomi? Are you asleep?," he whispered.

"No," she replied softly, propping herself up. She moved close to him, until their noses were touching. He smiled softly, which was always a little strange on his normally dour looking face, but she still found it wonderful. She liked his eyes, they were a hazel greenish color, they always looked different to her depending on what he was wearing. She cupped his jaw with her hand and brushed her thumb over his cheek.

She kissed him softly. This time she knew he was expecting it. She really liked how he kissed. He was tender and she could really _feel _just how much he loved her, which was strange to her, strange for a physical action to convey such emotion, let alone love.

She pulled away from him when she heard his breathing start to get heavier, like he had just been running and his hands started grabbing more roughly.

"Can we go upstairs?," she asked lowly.

"If that is what you would like," he said, trying to compose himself a little. She nodded and grabbed his hand as she got off the couch, taking him with her.

He went into the bathroom and started brushing his teeth. She sat down on their bed; it really was their bed, he stayed over more often than he stayed at his flat with Mal. She ran a hand through her hair and couldn't help but feel on edge. She didn't know what to do, she couldn't believe that this day had finally come, that he was going to leave tomorrow.

This is it, Naomi, your last night with him.

She knew she was putting a lot of pressure on herself, but she just wanted—she wanted something _normal, _something happy to think about when he was gone. Not panic and tears, not anger and long-lost fathers, something just for them.

He came back into their room with his shirt off, clad only in his boxers. He twisted at the waist to crack his back, groaning as the bones popped.

"Are you sore?," she asked, slightly concerned.

"A little, ran 10k in full gear, which I'm sure makes you laugh but I think I'm getting old," he joked.

Naomi chuckled. "Don't say that, I'm 12 years older than you!," she smiled.

"No, you work hard, I won't laugh at your pansy 10k with 80 pounds of gear," she teased him, her tone slightly devious for her.

He smirked. "You'll have to show me up sometime and I can see how it's really done."

She sat behind him and started to rub his shoulders. He groaned.

"Ahhh, Naomi," he closed his eyes and felt her rub where she knew took the brunt of his field gear. He continued to praise her to the point where she was laughing whole-heartedly at how ridiculous he was being.

"I'm the luckiest man in the world," he sighed as she dug her thumb into his lower back, working on a knot.

"And I am the luckiest woman," she said into his ear as she rested her chin on his shoulder.

He scoffed. It made her frown. He had a relatively low opinion of himself. She knew he was very conscious of the scar on his face and was bitter about how he hadn't made rank in years despite exemplary performance. Naomi knew that it wasn't his fault, cutting scores could be a bitch for Marines and despite the fact that plenty of Marines had died, it was usually the lower enlisted instead of the senior enlisted, leaving less spots to fill and more lower billets that needed manning.

"No," she protested and turned his head to her, "I really am," she said softly. She stopped rubbing his back and kissed him the soft way that she knew.

She loved his stubble—he always shaved in the morning but by the end of the day his face was scratchy again and she loved how it felt. She very intentionally deepened their kiss and he put his hand up her tank top, tracing the outline of her stomach muscles like she knew he liked. Hell, she enjoyed it.

Learning to enjoy sexual feelings and touches had been difficult. It took so much vulnerability, so many inhibitions she was forced to let go. She hadn't been trained that way. She'd been trained to block everything out, to put others first, to remain unmovable, to kill desire for duty.

She didn't have a duty anymore, and even if she had, she didn't want it. She was done with it. She'd had enough for lifetimes.

He traced up her stomach slowly and reached up to her stopped kissing her and pulled away.

"What is this?," he said asked, feeling the lacy texture of the bra. A huge smile overtook her face and she said something that she never could have imagined herself saying a few months ago:

"Take off my shirt and see."

She felt like all of her blood rushed to her head after she'd said that. She was so embarrassed at her boldness but also proud, proud of herself for trying to be even be the littlest bit seductive.

She sat up and let him pull her tank top over her head. She watched his eyes widen and she smiled. It made her feel flustered but very flattered.

"When did you get that?," he asked, finally speaking after moments of simply staring. He ran his hand over her décolletage slowly, his calloused fingertips leaving goosebumps on her skin.

"A few months ago, took me some time to work up the nerve to actually wear it," she chuckled nervously.

He shook his head incredulously.

"Woman, the things I have seen you do and you are afraid of...lace?," he laughed. She giggled but stopped when he leaned in to kiss her neck, her laugh turning into a breathy sigh.

"Mmm," she hummed pleasantly. It was strange, the feelings that she felt when he kissed her. She loved the attention, but mostly it was his intensity about everything. He kissed and touched her as if she were the only thing in the world that mattered, like water after a day without or warmth after a blizzard.

She also had to admit, she enjoyed his body. She liked how rough his skin was and how it felt when his muscles flexed beneath her hands. He was strong and she liked that, she liked the ridges on his abdomen and she couldn't particularly place why.

He pulled away and looked at her, smiling slightly. He was doing that a lot this evening.

"Vasya," she said, her voice breathy and unfamiliar to her, but she felt short on breath.

"Hmm?," he hummed distractedly, his lips kissing her cheeks and neck lazily.

"I want you," she said quietly.

"You already have me," he murmured against her shoulder.

She shook her head. "No, I want to be with you."

He stopped. He pulled away from her and sat up.

"Naomi, I'll be back, we don't have to do anything because I'm

leavingâ€"

"That's not why," she interrupted quickly. He looked at her skeptically.

"Well," she sat up and put her hands in her lap, "it is part of it, but I think that's natural. No, Vasya it's...I feel ready, I want to be close to you."

"We are already close."

She couldn't stand that expression. It was how he always looked when he felt sorry for her, when he thought of her Father and everything she'd missed out on.

I'm tired of missing out. That's not who I am anymore.

"But not as close as we could be," she leaned forward and put her hand on his chest. She watched his eyes dart down to her breasts and quickly back to her eyes, clearly trying to avoid how she looked in the lingerie.

Now or never, Naomi. Don't choke.

She swallowed the lump in her throat before she spoke.

"I have shared more of myself with you than I have ever shared with anyone in my life," she exhaled shakily, willing herself to keep talking even though she was more nervous than she had ever been.

"I want to be close to you physically, but most of all," she pulled him close to her, pressing her breasts against his chest as boldly as she could muster, surprising herself with how much she actually enjoyed the sensation. She could feel his heartbeat against her chest, his eyes wide and his breathing a little shallow.

"Most of all," she repeated, "I want to make a choice. I want to do something with my body for me. Not for the UNSC or humanity," she said angrily. She had his attention, he was staring at her with wide eyes, clearly shocked at what she was saying.

I don't want to scare him.

She shook her head and frowned, trying to calm herself down a little bit.

"I want to use my body to love you, and I want you to show me how much you love me," she said quietly, her voice shaking.

There. I've said it. You've tried, there's nothing else you can do.

She could feel the silence between them. Right before she was about to give up and let her shame overwhelm her completely, he spoke.

"Okay," he said quietly.

She felt surprised. She couldn't believe that he actually wanted her, despite his repeated declarations of love and acceptance, his

devotion and affection, she hadn't been sure if he had viewed her that wayâ€"as an equal, as a partner, let alone as a lover.

"Really?," she asked him, her voice reflecting her slight disbelief.

He nodded. "But you need to tell me if you want me to stop. I don't want to do anything you don't want me to."

She nodded.

"I promise," she whispered, her lips close to his, "please, show me, show me how you love me," she said even more quietly. Her entire body was trembling with a strange combination of fear and excitement.

He kissed her. She felt so nervous but at the same time so excited.

She was surprised that through the entire experience, she was able to stay completely present in the moment. So many times in her life had she drifted off to somewhere far, far away. She didn't really know where she drifted to, it had just become a coping mechanism, a way to deal with the pain and suffering she'd endured her entire life. It had started as a young child and continued with her through her hastened adolescence and the surgeries that she'd endured. During intense physical exertion and gunshot wounds it became her best friend, her sanctuary outside of herself, a way to be far, far away from whatever particular hell she'd been experiencing that day.

In these times of peace, it was difficult to stop drifting. It'd been her only refuge before, and now that her life was something short of an absolute mess, she actually wanted to be present. There'd be times where she'd been staring off into space for what had felt like a few moments but she'd realize she'd been gone for an hour. Gone to where she'd never been quite sure, but it was strange, so hard to differentiate from the past and the present

This was different though. Everything was so...tactile, so real. She clutched at his arms and his back. She felt his breath on her neck and both of their hearts pounding in their chests. She didn't even need to try to be in a moment with him, she was there and it was more than she could've ever anticipated, how overwhelmingly wonderful it was to be with him. She wanted so badly to trust, she desperately wanted to believe that someone could want her for who she was instead of what she could do for them.

She couldn't doubt any more how he felt, all the months of doubt and fear felt silly now. It was absurd to think he felt anything besides pure, genuine love for her. From his kisses to the way he looked into her eyes as he moved over her, she knew that he just wanted her for who she was. She had never felt so _normal _yet so gloriously _alive_.

He ran a hand through her hair and traced lazy circles on her stomach. She had never been completely naked with him, at least not in bed or both of them naked together.

"Thank you," she said to him softly.

"You do not need to thank me for anything," he murmured against her forehead, pressing a kiss on her hairline.

"I do. Thank you for loving me for me," she inhaled shakily, "thank you for letting me love you," her voice cracked.

He watched a tear roll down her cheek. It was such a common misconception that Spartans simply didn't feel the way everyone else did, that they were somehow stunted or just plain wrong that way. He couldn't imagine a greater lie. Maybe they tried to tell themselves that and maybe the rest of the UNSC wanted to believe it, but he knew it was a falsehood. She felt things deeply with a frightening intensity. He wiped the tear from her cheek and kissed her.

"Now you have to know that I love you, can't have a doubt in that head of yours," he chuckled. She laughed softly, snuggling further into his embrace.

I'm afraid for him to leave. _

Feeling fear was difficult. She had never allowed herself to feel fear. She always got rid of it, tucked it somewhere far away and did whatever she needed to do.

Now there was nowhere to hide it. She couldn't shove it in a corner and forget about it in gunfire and adrenaline. She had to deal with it. More importantly, she couldn't let him know how much it was affecting her. She needed him to go with no regrets.

She didn't want to sleep, but she knew he needed his rest. She turned off the lights and he was quickly sleeping, but not before he told her he loved her again sleepily.

She didn't sleep the whole night, she simply spent the night trying to memorize and catalogue every detail about him. She could see just as well in the darkness as she did with light so it was easy for her to see every freckle or scar.

I need this so when he is gone I will never forget a single thing about him._

That was her biggest fear, forgetting even the tiniest detail about him. He was too important for that. Her world couldn't go on if she couldn't remember his jawline, every mole, every scar and detail.

She had so much love and support from Serin and the rest of Kilo-5 but it just wasn't the same. He was her comfort, her other half and her home.

In a few short hours, his alarm went off.

She watched him snap out of bed the way only good, solid military indoctrination could produce. He started getting dressed and she watched him some extra pairs of socks. He paused.

"You folded these," he said looking at the perfectly round sock ball.

She laughed and nodded.

"I can't unfold this, it's perfect," he said in mock awe. He tucked it away carefully in his backpack as if it were something precious.

"Sometimes if I could tell Serin was feeling stressed I would go and roll her t-shirts as a joke. She was really bad at rolling shirts," she said quietly as she got up and put on some comfortable clothes. She had the day off to take Vaz to the installation for departure.

She was quiet when they loaded the car and started to drive. She could feel herself starting to feel panicked. When they got on base she realized something.

"Vasya, we didn't use any...what if I'm pregnant?," Her heart was pounding. She didn't want to be pregnant but she hadn't even thought about it.

"_Dorogaya, _don't worry, I just got my shot and I'm no Spartan so I should be shooting blanks, so to speak," he chuckled.

Relief flooded her and she sighed.

She was able to walk out to the ship he would depart on. There were entire families and plenty of weeping people. These people were used to saying goodbye to their loved ones when the Covenant was killing people by the millions. Even though that wasn't the case this time, this deployment should be relatively safe in comparison, they still couldn't forget. Naomi understood their anxiety.

In the past she had always felt a little strange at things like this-she had had no weeping family or pictures of loved ones. Now she was on the other side and she could fully appreciate how difficult this was. She wouldn't cry in front of him though. She would be fine, he was a Marine and Marines deployed, it's what they did.

They were getting a few looks from people and she knew it was because of her. She stuck out and it made her uncomfortable, but she wouldn't let it ruin her last moments with him.

"I'll contact you when I can, probably when we achieve our first orbit."

She nodded. She couldn't bring herself to say anything, she was too afraid her voice would crack or something equally humiliating. She felt awkward and she felt like retreating, doing anything she could to protect herself from the hurt she knew she was about to feel.

She didn't want to kiss him in front of so many people so she settled for a stiff hug. He understood, he knew things like this made her anxious so he just held her tightly enough for the both of them.

She watched him walk to the ship. He didn't turn around and look at her. She knew that was too difficult. She walked back to the car and stared off into space for an uncertain amount of time.

Come back to me Vasya. You need to come back to me.

* * *

><p>Don't know when next update will be, but I'm getting my groove back. :) We've got quite a bit of Naomi coming up, but I'm going to try and break it up with other characters and POVs too, like to change it up. See you guys later, please review it brightens my day. :)<p>

38. Chapter 38

Wow guys, I'm sorry it's been like a hundred years. First it started off as just a hard time writing bits and pieces, then my grandfather just passed away and that has been really difficult. I'm doing okay, it was just his time but it's been hard all the same. So here's a chapter, a drama, action packed chapter for you guys. You all deserve it! Hopefully next chapter will be up sooner. 3

* * *

><p>They were well into the Spring semester and John could see an end in sight. Sooner, rather than later, they would leave Earth for their tiny house in the outer reaches of the galaxy.<p>

The idea brought him a shocking amount of relief. Earth was amazing, there were so many people, so many places, and so many things to do.

It was overwhelming.

The apartment was relatively quiet because it was high up, but the streets were loud, the lights were bright and the people were numerous. He missed the mountains, he missed running outside without stopping at street lights, he missed their garden and their bed.

It was a Saturday, so Cortana didn't have classes or lectures to do. He was excited that they could all go out and run errands together as a family. Joan was also excited to go to the park.

"Daddy! I'm all ready to go, hurry _up!,_ " he heard Joan yell from the hallway. He could hear her literally bouncing up and down with anticipation. He had no idea how she could get so excited about. He quickly grabbed his favorite zip-up sweatshirt and walked out to the hallway.

Joan quickly reached up and grabbed his hand. She liked to hold his hand wherever they went. This was a little difficult because of how tall he was, he had to hunch over a little and it made walking awkward, but he didn't mind all too much. He liked holding her hand.

"I don't like taking the train with Joan, I'm going to call a car," she mumbled as she tapped her watch.

John found this slightly silly. Joan acted just fine on trains and cars were more expensive than the train. John knew Cortana just didn't like trains very much, or public transit in general. He knew he had no real reason to want to save money, but he always tried to save when he could, he wasn't a person of excess.

"Mama, when are we going to the park?," asked Joan a little louder than necessary.

"After we go to the bank sweetheart, Dad and I have a few things to take care of and then I promise we'll go to the park as long as you would like," she said kindly, running a hand through Joan's hair. Joan smiled. The bank was boring, but she could wait if it meant she got to go to the park.

Joan liked when she could sit by the window. She hated her carseat and how the belts made her feel all restricted, but she liked to look at all the cars outside. All the buildings and different people were fun to look at.

The car pulled up and Mom unhooked her seatbelt.

The building in front of her was _huge. _Joan couldn't help but look up. She couldn't even see the top of the building it was so high, and all glass.

"Mama, that building's _tall,_" she said, grabbing her mother's hand.

"Yes it is, and it's very new!"

Mom was _super _smart. Joan didn't know many people, but she was very sure her mom was the smartest person in the whole world. Dad had said so, and Mom knew absolutely _everything _about _anything. _

John couldn't help but smile at Joan's awed expression. Even he had to agree, the structure was rather impressive.

The bank they needed to go to was only on the fifth floor of the impressive building, so the elevator ride wasn't very long.

"Why do you need to actually go to the bank again?," he asked Cortana. It was unusual that she ever had to go to a building and actually do something when she could normally do everything from home.

Cortana sighed.

"There's been a lot of fraud with bank accounts in the Outer Colonies, people trying to evade taxes and things like that, so it's far easier to go in person to the bank and transfer money from an Earth account to an Outer Colony account, far less steps than if I did it remotely."

John found it interesting that Earth found _yet another _small thing to make Outer Colony life more cumbersome. When he found himself thinking thoughts like this, he usually pushed them to the back of his mind. He was loyal to Earth and he was loyal to the system that he'd bled to preserve, but he couldn't help but see some things that needed reform. Poverty, struggle and anger were part of life in the Outer Colonies. Things like Cortana's entire program were meant to ameliorate situations like thisâ€"something he was extremely proud ofâ€"but there were definitely oversights.

Surprisingly enough, the entire floor was crowded with people. He had thought that in this day and age everyone could do this remotely, but

apparently money was simply one of those things that remained complex despite technology.

He held Joan's hand while she fidgeted, anxious to go the park. He couldn't blame her. It was boring for a little kid and she wasn't making a scene, so he considered the entire thing a success.

"Joan, do you want to ride on my back?," he asked. She smiled that toothy grin that made his heart skip a beat and nodded yes. He picked her up and felt her wrap her arms tightly around him and start to talk to him about all of the fun things they would do at the park.

He couldn't shake a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach. He felt paranoid, almost anxious and he simply couldn't place why. He watched Cortana fiddle with her tablet and glanced around. He hadn't felt this way for a long, long time.

_Stop it. You're being silly. _

He shook his head and shifted his weight on either foot nervously.

Everything after that happened slowly.

He heard the initial detonation sound four stories below before anyone in the room. He grabbed Cortana. She gasped, looking at him shocked and confused. He was running, running towards the windows.

"Hang on, Joan," he rasped. People screamed when the glass windows around them shattered and flames came up through the floor of the building. He felt the heat raging behind him and the glass cutting his arms and face.

He jumped.

Joan was crying and Cortana was screaming as they fell through the air. He felt Cortana wrap an arm around him and another arm grab Joan's wrists.

They hit the ground. Hard. Something in his leg made a rather sickening pop sound. The air was black and he could hear Joan and Cortana both coughing. Explosions were still moving up the building as he ran. He ran as fast as he could. He didn't know where he was running, all he knew was that he was going away, far away from here. He didn't think about the debris or the people he was undoubtedly running over, he had to get Cortana and Joan away.

After three minutes of an all out sprint, he had to stop. The air was clearer here. People were still running and panicking, crying, a few bleeding but injuries here were minimal.

We have to be the only people who made it out of that building.

Joan was wailing and Cortana had started crying herself. He set them down on a bench and looked at them. They were both covered head to toe in soot, their skin completely blackened. He looked at Joan and noticed a laceration spanning from her right cheekbone towards the

corner of her mouth, bleeding at a somewhat steady pace.

The wound wasn't mortal, she would be fine, but the emotions that washed over him, seeing her bleed, seeing her so scared and so afraid, were overwhelming. He grabbed her and hugged her to him tightly.

"You're okay, it's okay, Mom and Dad are here, it's all fine," he said to her, his own voice shaking.

"Iâ€"wantâ€"toâ€"goâ€"home," she cried, her words punctuated by sobs.

He felt Cortana wrap her arms around them both. They stayed like that, the chaos of first responders drowning out their tears.

* * *

><p>Naomi busied herself. She ignored how cold her bed was without Vaz, she ignored his empty drawers and left his shaving cream in the cabinet where it always had been. She threw herself into her assistant duties for Serin and six weeks had already passed.<p>

She'd spoken to Vaz twice. He didn't tell her details of what he was doing which was to be expected, but she did know that he had done two orbital drops, though she wasn't sure if they were into combat. She knew there was unrest between the Brutes and the Elites still and some situations with human populations involved. She also knew that recovering assets various assetsâ€"from defunct AIs with too much information to not go through proper decommissioning to random pieces of hardware on ships and slipspace drives that had crashed and not been scavenged or destroyedâ€"was important nowadays.

She had fought the pangs of loneliness she felt rather well. She focused on counting the days and how each day was a day closer to him being home. She didn't know exactly when he would be home, that was the nature of deployments. She could guess from her own experience that it'd be between six months to a year.

Today, she was having lunch with Serin. This was an extremely rare occurrence, the woman was almost always meeting with people or far too busy to even take a lunch. They were at Serin's favorite place near base, sitting outside with a view of the ocean. Naomi found it comforting but Serin was the one at home near water. Serin would have fit in very well with the old Navy that still used boats and warships. She took to the ocean the way Naomi took to the stars and space.

"Even though we live together it feels like we never see each other, how are you Naomi?" The often stoic admiral folded a napkin on her lap and glanced at her. Naomi could tell she was concerned, but only because she knew her extremely well. Something about the way her eyebrows arched slightly upward, a slightly gentle tone in her voiceâ€"these were all indicators of compassion for Serin.

"I'm okay. What about you?," Naomi felt stiff and awkward. She couldn't say she was happy, she couldn't really even say she was sad, she just was here. She hated it, but without Vaz everything seemed just...grey. Everything was dull, numb, or uninteresting. In some

ways, this was fine with Naomi. She didn't bother getting upset about the present. Being upset about the present was pointless. All she could do was exist in the moment, she wouldn't allow herself to wither away and feeling somewhat numb was a good alternative to that, at least in her opinion.

She could tell Serin was worried but wasn't going to pry. That wasn't her way. She would find other, more clever ways of figuring out her mood, which wouldn't be too difficult considering they lived together.

"I'm glad we're having lunch because I wanted to tell you, I'm going into space for some...cleaning up, I suppose, for a few months. You don't need to come, I won't need you and honestly I can't get a civilian the security clearance you would need, even a former Spartan, so, I'm going to be putting you on leave for the next few months."

Serin looked at Naomi. The blonde woman's face was completely blank and Serin found it unnerving.

_I hate it when she makes that face. I feel so helpless. _

Naomi always made that indifferent, blank face when she wanted to hide anything unpleasant. Everyone had nervous ticks, everyone had habits, but due to years of improper socialization, Naomi always seemed a little off. When she was upset, this was exacerbated. She didn't really know how to express displeasure, sadness or fear. It was all internal, and that blank stare gave it away for Serin.

"You can take the time to pick up a hobby, I know you like cooking. You could go visit John and Cortana, I know they would love to see youâ€œ"

"Serin, I don't need to be babysat," she said a little more harshly than she intended.

Naomi frowned and felt slightly guilty at the Admiral's awkward glance downward.

She's just trying to be kind. You might look like a total freakshow to her.

"Look, I'm fine," she said, slightly exasperated, trying to reassure her friend. "I've talked to Vaz and he's fine, deployments come to an end."

Serin sighed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. I know you're fine," she fanned herself. "Shit, is it hot out here?"

"No hotter than normal," said Naomi.

"Ugh, I'm getting old, I've been having hot flashes like no other, I'm so excited for this menopause bullshit to be over with, the sooner the better, I need to get to the doctor because I'm sick of sweating through my uniform every damn day."

Naomi chuckled.

"How are you laughing, aren't you having the same thing?"

Naomi shook her head. "No, I'm still running likeâ€¦" she paused and tried to think of her last period.

Before Vaz left.

"Something wrong?"

"No, um, I just forgot something. I have to go, I'm sorry," she got up quickly and gathered her purse. She walked quickly to her car, not really seeing her surroundings, her vision already tunneling in panic.

_I had to have gotten it, there's no way. _

She didn't know where she was driving, she was already frantic.

Get it together Naomi. Pharmacy. Find a pharmacy.

She somehow managed to get herself to a pharmacy. She walked around the parking lot anxiously for a few minutes before she actually went in. This didn't help at all she still felt like her head was going to explode. She stalled even more and walked around the pharmacy aimlessly, half-heartedly glancing at anything from cosmetics to bed-pans.

"Ma'am, is there anything you need help with?," asked an employee dressed in a collared shirt.

"No," Naomi snapped.

The worker who had approached her scurried away, clearly afraid of the tall woman.

She grabbed a box of pregnancy tests.

* * *

><p>His knee was completely dislocated and he'd re injured his achilles tendon. Aside from minor lacerations and some glass stuck in his arms, he was okay.<p>

Cortana had a few bumps and bruises but she was fine. Joan's cut needed tending to, but the medical triages set up wouldn't even look at the three of them considering the amount of horrific injuries that the explosion had caused. John knew that there had to be thousands dead and injured at minimum.

All transit had been suspended. The city blocks were in chaos. All they could do was try to walk home.

Joan continued to whimper and cry on his back. Cortana walked shakily beside him, trying to talk to Joan but failing.

He limped, his knee grinding painfully out of its socket. He paused as he carried them and braced himself for the pain of pushing it quickly back into place. He bit his bottom lip and held back a curse and tucked the discomfort away. He needed to get his family

home.

Their home was at five miles away from the explosion and the moving was slow. It took them over two hours to cover the distance, between the wailing sirens and hysterical sirens, even John felt exhausted by the time he summoned the elevator up to their apartment.

_I am getting old. _

There was a time where explosions and mass casualties had been his norm, his daily grind. It had never been _easy, _death never was, but it hadn't been this jarring, this upsetting.

He fumbled with the buttons on Joan's jumper. She was still afraid. He couldn't help but feel a tear roll down his cheek at the sight of her bright blue eyes looking up at him from a soot covered face with dried blood on her cheek.

He took off his clothes and turned on the shower head. He, Cortana and Joan all sat on the floor of the shower, shaking glass and debris out of their hair and watching the soot filled water swirl down the drain.

He grabbed his bathrobe and watched Cortana do the same. He went into the bathroom cabinet and grabbed ointment for Joan's cut.

He added it and she cried, the ointment stinging.

He frowned.

He dressed Joan in her pajamas and set her in their bed. He wanted her by them right now. He didn't want either Joan or Cortana out of his sight. Joan, clearly exhausted, quickly fell asleep.

"We didn't get to this soon enough. It's going to scar," he shook his head. He felt so ashamed. He couldn't get them home quickly enough.

"You did the best you could," said Cortana, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"I should've been carrying first-aid supplies or somethingâ€"

"John, this isn't a war, how could you expect something like this, that's ridiculous," said Cortana sighing.

He looked at her, a small cut on the bottom of her lip.

She started to cry again.

"I love you, I'm so glad we're okay," she whimpered.

He kissed her insistently, firmly. He wanted to feel her, he wanted to know she was there, that they were in their bed, safe from whoever had tried to harm them today.

They broke apart and he hugged her close to him. They stayed like that for a few minutes, listening to the other breath and shake. John hadn't shook like this in recent memory. How close had he come to

losing them? To dying? Closer than he had in years, and that terrified him.

They crawled into the bed, Joan sleeping deeply between the two of them and turned off the lights.

* * *

><p>Vaz watched the video again.<p>

It was a simple video, he must've shot it on a Saturday morning. Naomi was in her pajamas still, making breakfast. She had music playing and she even shuffled around slightly to the beat as she flipped a pancake.

His favorite part was when she turned around and realized he had been filming her, her shocked look and red blush of embarrassment made him laugh every time.

"Stop that!," she said, but he could tell she didn't mean it and that she was holding back laughter. Her smile and the way her eyes crinkled made him feel a strange feeling in his chest, like he just couldn't miss her any more than he did. It was painful but in a wonderful way. It was better to have the pain of missing someone than having no one, something he also knew well.

"Wow, she's _pretty_."

Vaz glared.

He had to have the most annoying private in the world under his supervision. It was his first deployment and he was the biggest boot he'd encountered in a long, long time.

"So I just financed a car at home for only 20% interest, and zero down," his subordinate rambled.

How did I end up in charge of the boot of all boots. This is bull shit, I need to make rank.

He didn't respond, in his traditional Russian way.

"My girl is pregnant," he said.

That got Vaz's attention.

"How?"

The boot looked at him. "Um, the usual way?"

"No but how, we just deployed and got shot up, _how_?"

He looked at him strangely, like he had just said grass was pink or that the sun revolved around the Earth.

"Didn't you hear? There was a batch of shots that were shit, people are saying it's a big government conspiracy to get human population up after the Covenant."

Vaz's eyes widened.

"You worried?"

"Round up all the other boots and go police call the hangar bay, tell them staff sergeant told you to," Vaz mumbled grumpily. He was going to go for a run.

There's no way. Everything is fine. Get ready for your drop tomorrow.

* * *

><p>No. This can't be happening. I'm not doing this.

She hadn't felt so afraid in her entire life. She stared at the positive pregnancy test and felt nothing but dread and terror.

_I can't be a mother. I don't know how to be a mother. I can't do this. I need Vasya. _

The idea of having her body change so much in such a short period of time was horrifying. Losing control over herself like that, losing her existence and the barely there autonomy she'd worked so, so hard for when she didn't know the first thing about children.

She drove entirely too fast on the way home and opened the door so carelessly it slammed into the wall and made a dent.

She didn't care. She went upstairs and looked at herself in her mirror. She looked relatively crazed. She ran her hand over her still flat stomach.

Kelly is a mother. Maybe I could be a mom.

She looked at her face. She was surprised at how tired and scared she already looked, just minutes after finding out about this potential child. She thought about her stomach swelling and her ribs shifting to accommodate the growing child.

Visions of doctors and needles and the pain and the terror and her Father and how he had left her-

He didn't leave you.

_How do you know that? You were a Spartan meant to save the human race, not a daughter or a child. _

_No. That's Halsey talking, my dad loved me. _

And he thought you a monster, because that's what you were made into, with metal and knives and chemicals shot into every part of you-

_No, no, no . Too much. _

She shook her head.

Don't be an idiot. You're too screwed up, too afraid, too much of a freak to be a mother.

She looked into the mirror. She hadn't started crying but she looked like a ghost, her face was pale and she had broken into a cold sweat. For the first time she felt and looked every single one of her years.

She picked up a phone and looked up a number. She had already made up her mind.

I'm sorry. This is better, for everyone involved, especially the child.

"Women's Health Services Sydney West, how can I help you today?"

"My name is Naomi Sentzke and I need an abortion."

* * *

><p>She felt sick to her stomach. She went out running and pushed herself harder than she normally did.<p>

She turned on the shower as hot as it would go and it made her skin turn an ugly, blotchy red but she didn't care.

She put on some pajamas and laid down on her bed, her still wet body dripping onto her clothes and sheets. She fell into a fitful sleep.

She was dreaming of crying children. She wanted it to stop. She heard Vaz's voice intermixed with cries, cries that shook her to her very core. Soon, his screams and yells were mixed with her own screams. Everything was blurry, red, and disorienting. She felt ready to vomit and a strange sensation of vertigo.

She woke up in a cold sweat.

_It was a dream. This will all be over soon. _

She winced. She felt pain in her lower abdomen. It was awful enough to make her cry out as she felt a particularly strong cramp.

She turned on her bedside light and screamed at what she saw.

Serin woke up with a start.

_Naomi. _

She got out of bed and quickly put on her robe. She ran up to Naomi's room.

_She could have had a nightmare, she might attack me if I walk in too quickly. _

She opened the door cautiously.

"Naomiâ€" "

Her words died and she gasped.

Naomi was sitting on her bed with the blankets thrown off revealing blood stained sheets.

"Oh God," she said quietly.

Naomi looked like she was in shock. She was staring blankly at her bloody thighs and sheets visibly shaking.

Serin sat down by her, not caring if she got any blood on her. She softly put a hand on her shoulder. Naomi flinched.

"Naomi-

"I was pregnant," Naomi whispered, "and now I'm not."

"You didn't do anything wrong."

Naomi shook her head. "It's fine. I was going to get rid of it. It's better this way. Better for everyone."

Serin frowned. She didn't believe her. She may have been thinking of terminating but Serin knew Naomi would take this as some sort of failure.

"Let's get you cleaned up," she said softly.

Naomi was like a rag doll, hardly helping as Serin took her to the bathroom. When she sat on the ground and didn't make a move to undress herself, Serin started to worry.

She turned on the water and sat down across from her.

"Naomi?"

Naomi didn't look at her. She was somewhere far away. Serin swallowed.

"Naomi, I'm going to help you undress, okay?"

Naomi nodded the tiniest amount.

Serin carefully undressed her and simply put her clothes in the trash.

She took her and essentially lifted her into the bath tub. She washed her and watched as the red water swirled down the drain.

She towed Naomi off and with surprisingly gentle hands she didn't know she had and she dressed her in new clothes with a pad in the underwear for more bleeding. She combed through Naomi's white blonde hair and braided it as gently as she could to keep it out of her way.

_At least she is clean now. _

"Come to my room, don't look," Serin said softly leading her away from her bloody bed.

Naomi started to shake and walked with her to her room. Serin put her into her bed and watched her shake and wince with the pain.

It must be very uncomfortable for her to show this much pain.

"I'm going to go get you some of my leg pain killers and some water, I'll be right back."

Naomi didn't respond, she just stared blankly at the ceiling. It scared Serin, that blank, vacant stare.

Serin came back with pills and brought the glass of water to her mouth, trying to help her sip. It was like trying to feed someone who was asleep, the water dribbled down the sides of her mouth. With a bit of effort, Naomi managed to swallow the medication.

"I'll stay here with you, this should all pass sometime tomorrow. Until then I'm here for you and I'm not going anywhere," she said as she put in her work calendar that she would be working from home.

Naomi didn't respond but turned on her side, wrapping her arms around herself and bringing her knees to her chest. She muttered something.

"What?"

"Don't tell Vasya," she croaked.

"I won't," Serin sighed, "try to rest."

Hours passed and Serin couldn't tell if Naomi had slept at all but her discomfort had seemed to ease a little bit.

Naomi was in a daze. With every muscle spasm she felt her body betray her. She knew that she didn't want to be a mother and that she had planned to abort, but something about the violent, bloody, miserable mess that was happening upset her. It was far too much blood. Now she was questioning if she could've gone through with the procedure. What if she had wantedâ€¦.No, there was no way.

_I feel out of control. I feel betrayed by my body. I feel like a failure. _

Serin would occasionally run a hand on her forehead while she worked from her computer in bed.

Sometime in the late afternoon the pain and the blood slowed for a bit. She was exhausted and finally got a little bit of sleep.

Serin shook her awake.

"Naomi, Vaz is calling you," she said softly.

Naomi felt panicked and sat up the best she could but it felt impossible. Her limbs wouldn't cooperate, her head felt like it was in a bucket of water and her vision felt blurred.

_You have to talk to him. If you don't he'll know something is wrong and then he'll do something stupid like get distracted during an orbital drop and die and it'll be all your fault. _

"Give me the screen," Naomi said quietly. Serin did so and made to

get up.

"Stay," said Naomi sharply. She needed her there. Serin needed to stay. She couldn't get through this without her. Serin sat back down out of the screen's view.

Naomi exhaled shakily and answered the call.

Vaz's face popped up on the screen.

The emotions she felt seeing his face overwhelmed her. It was everything she could do to not burst into tears at the sight of his face. She could remember his stubble, his eyes, his hands, his hair, every single little thing she adored about him and each memory hurt her. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from sobbing.

"Hello," he said a little stiffly. She could tell he was tired.

"Hi," she said with composure she didn't know she possessed.

You have to do this. You have to be okay. For him.

"How are you?"

"Happy to hear your voice," she said quickly. It was true. She felt better even seeing his face.

"And I am happy to hear yours, _zvezda_," he said lowly, "I think of you every day."

Naomi frowned. "You need to think of what you're doing, your job is to fall out of the sky and kill things, you need to focus on the mission," she said sharply. His work was too dangerous. One mistake and he was dead. He shouldn't think on her.

Vaz frowned. "I know, I do. Please, do not worry about me so much, I can see even from here. Please, smile for me," he said softly.

She tried to smile but it was forced and she knew he would be able to tell. The smile felt like a joke, it felt like a _lie. _

"Naomi," he said softly, clearly worried.

"I'm sorry Vasya, I have had a difficult week, but I will be fine. Everyday is a day closer to you coming back to me," she said. It was the most genuine thing she'd said the entire conversation.

"I think of you before I sleep and when I wake up, it makes my day better."

"I will try to do the same," she said, her voice shaking a little.

"I have to go, have a drop tomorrow. I love you."

"I love you too," she said, trying her best to keep the shakiness out of her voice. The transmission ended.

Serin watched the shaking Spartan go through a range of emotions, a

few tears even rolling down her cheeks until she buried whatever she was feeling behind Spartan indifference, something Serin hadn't seen her _really _do in a long time.

"Naomi?"

"I'm okay," she said robotically.

_Everything is pointless. _

She felt her heart break inside of her and deep, deep sadness overcame her.

I want to be numb. I don't want to feel this anymore.

She laid back down and stared at the wall until she fell asleep again.

* * *

><p>Joan was still sleeping. He and Cortana sat in the living room, coffee mugs in their hands, silent.<p>

"Cortana," John rasped.

"What?," she asked flatly.

"Yesterday," he swallowed, "when I grabbed you and Joan, when I ran out of the building, I..." he paused, searching for the words, "I didn't care about anyone else in the building. I didn't care if they all lived or died. I didn't even think about it."

Her eyes flashed with what he recognized as interest.

"How does that make you feel?," she finally asked.

"That's the strange part," he looked down into his cup of coffee, steam rising off of the top, "I don't...I don't care."

* * *

><p>Drama drama drama for my folks this chapter. I hope you guys all liked it. Please review!<p>

39. Chapter 39

Heyyyy guysss...Sorry for the million year period between updates. Bought a house, started taking some classes, life has been crazy. I really hope you guys enjoy this chapter, I've been putting a lot of time and energy into this stuff lately, especially with Halo 5 coming out I've been pretty pumped! I hope all of you are well. :) Please review! :D

* * *

><p>Within twenty-four hours they had boxed up all of their belongings, purchased tickets and were on their way home.<p>

Classes for the last weeks of Cortana's semester had been cancelled

due to the event, but Cortana would've left anyways. She didn't want to be on Earth, she wanted to be back home with the quiet where Joan could run around outside and they needn't worry about her well-being.

Joan seemed okay, rather quickly returning to her normal cheerful self despite the stitches on her cheekâ€"a rather primitive way to close a wound but Cortana didn't feel comfortable doing anything else and doctors were so backed up that they couldn't bring Joan in for something so cosmetic.

Joan carried around her "Kelly bunny." She was very excited about going home. She missed Sam and her aunt and uncle.

After movers had come and taken everything to a shipping vessel, John helped dress Joan in a pair of floral printed pants and a button up shirt with a bow near the collar. Joan was very particular about the things she wore. She never allowed him to simply pick something out for her, she insisted upon having multiple choices. John would put together things that, to him, seemed to go together and his insistent toddler would scrunch up her face and decide she wanted _this _shirt with _those _bottoms.

Neither he or Cortana were what he considered 'creative' types, though Cortana was many things, she was more _particular _than anything.

"Dad?"

"Hmm?"

"Are we going home because of the 'splosion?"

John stopped packing her travel bag.

"Yes," he said simply. He didn't lie to her and he tried not to overcomplicate things.

"But how do we know it won't happen again?"

He watched her frown and pick at her stitches. Automatically he reached to her little hand and pulled it away from her face to stop her.

His hand was visibly trembling.

And it was all coming in waves.

Explosions, the unmistakable smell of burning flesh. Purple blood of Elites splattered on him, falling through the air, pelicans crashing into buildings, Marines crying for the long dead Corpsman as they bled out in a spray of gunfire.

"Daddy?"

He shook his head quickly, brought back to the current moment. He'd never had something like that happen, an onslaught of memories of the war like that. It'd never bothered him, anything he had been through. Cortana was the one who woke up screaming in the middle of the night thinking of the Gravemind, of the sensation of him going into cardiac

arrest, never him.

"We don't know, Joan."

She felt confused. Her parents knew everything, they always knew answers whenever she asked.

Dad looked upset. He rarely looked upset. It made her feel a little afraid. He was so big and strong, he could carry her all day, afterall.

She put her hand on top of his large one that was clasping her own gently. She leaned into his touch and snuggled herself into his arm.

"Don't worry Daddy, I'll take care of it."

John looked at his snuggly little three year old.

She was growing up so quickly.

Until now, he hadn't realized how much she had healed in him. A childhood forged in the crucible of Reach, a lifetime of war and loss, all completely renewed and made purposeful with the existence of his daughter.

She wasn't ruined by anything. She had not concept of evil, not concept of death or war. The attack was her first experience of terror and, to her, it was an isolated incident. A mistake, an anomaly that could simply be wished away.

"How do you plan to do that Joan?"

She closed her eyes and smiled softly.

"I'll be me, and you can be you, nothing bad will happen if we are just ourselves!" she replied simply.

He chuckled. Her simplistic view of the world was refreshing, no matter how flawed it was.

"That sounds like a good plan."

"Are you ready?" he heard Cortana holler from the entryway. She had been no-nonsense, strict business in the process of packing up the past year of their lives. She had a mission, and it was to get them the hell off of Earth.

Joan picked up her Kelly bunny and ran towards the sound of her mother's voice.

"We coming Mama!" she yelled.

John picked up the travel bags and followed her calmly.

We'll be ourselves and everything will be okay.

That sounded nice, even if it was idealistic.

He was gonna try and follow that.

* * *

><p>Missing Vaz had been hard enough before.<p>

She missed how he smelled, his laugh, how he made coffee in the morning and complained about his young Marines in the evening.

Missing him when she felt so much despair and so much sadness was something else entirely.

Everything felt hard. Getting out of bed, making food, exercising, answering her phone-each task took time and effort that she simply did not want to exert.

It was difficult, but she was starting to put herself back together after the miscarriage.

She didn't understand why it had upset her so much. She felt like she'd somehow failed.

_What if I wanted that baby? _

She picked at her nail beds-an annoying habit she'd taken to when she was feeling upset.

She'd never felt this kind of despair. It was foreign and terrifying. She felt empty, forcing herself to do things but not actually caring about the outcome. She wanted the days to tick by, she wanted Vaz to come home. If he had just been home, she could put all of this behind her.

But she survived. A month and a half. Forty-five days. She'd managed to pull something of a life together, a way of filling the minutes of each day which crept toward whenever he was coming home.

She could go out for a run, practice yoga at her local studio, read a novel, things she enjoyed, without constantly thinking about it.

She grabbed a water bottle and her backpack-she was about to drive to a yoga class and then go to the library to find another book to read. She needed an escape, something to occupy her mind.

Then Vaz's favorite song started buzzing out of her pocket-he'd changed her phone ringer to it a few weeks before he had left. It always made her smile a little bit, even if it made her feel sad.

She felt her heart skip a beat when it the number was restricted.

Serin always calls from a restricted line, calm down.

She had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Something was off. Something was different.

You're being a moron.

"Hello?" she answered softly.

"Is this Naomi Sentzke?"

"This is she," she trailed off.

She didn't recognize the caller's voice-wasn't one of Serin's cohort, wasn't anyone from work.

"I'm calling because you are listed as Marine Staff Sergeant Vasily Beloi's primary contact, you're his friend?"

"I'm his girlfriend."

She was starting to panic already. Phone calls were never good news, not in her experience.

"There's been an accident. On yesterday's drop we lost contact with the fire team he was leading. Efforts are currently being made to recover him but it's been twenty hours without a sign of him."

"..."

"Ms. Sentzke?"

"..."

"If anything changes, you will be notified."

She dropped the phone on the ground.

She didn't cry. She didn't scream.

This is my life. This is what happens to me. People I love are taken from me. This is something I accept about myself now. I wasn't made for love.

She dropped her backpack onto the ground and walked, one foot in front of the other to her bedroom.

With each step she took up the staircase, she remembered moments with her burly Russian man. All of the happiness they had had in the years past.

It had been more than she'd been able to hope for, really. She should take it and be grateful, grateful that in her freakish experiment of a life that she'd gotten to experience something normal, something so beautiful that it had once created the illusion of she herself being just like everyone else.

She went into his closet and grabbed one of his old, ratty Marine Corps zip up sweatshirts. He'd always found it slightly embarrassing. The eagle, globe and anchor were 'far too moto for any self-respecting helljumper' but his mother had gotten it for him in one of her last lucid days when he'd graduated boot camp, so he never threw it away.

She pulled back the covers on the bed and crawled in, laying on her back.

It didn't really fit her. His shoulders were broader than her's, but her arms were longer so the sleeves ended somewhere around her forearms. She thumbed the fraying edges of the cuff and remembered Sunday evenings watching movies with him while he wore this shirt.

It was all over.

She stared at the ceiling.

Naomi stayed in bed. Days blended into weeks. She didn't know how much time had passed.

Thoughts of their time together passed through her head. She thought of evenings when they would go outside and look at the stars in the Australian evening sky.

There would be no more stars. Not for her, not in this life.

Perhaps they had burned too bright, too soon. Maybe he had made her life too beautiful, too wonderful for it to be fair. She wasn't allowed to be happy, after all. Her life was meant for honor, courage, commitment. To protect others, to sacrifice. Her childhood. Her family. Her life. She could only give, never take, never have something that was hers. She had been silly to think anything else.

At first, she could bring herself to get small amounts of food-crackers, bread, but eventually the effort became too much.

She hadn't showered or changed her clothes-she couldn't bear to take off his sweatshirt, even for a moment.

Everything was tiring and heavy, so she started sleeping most of the day.

Just a little more, she'd think.

It was days.

Sometimes the phone sounded like it was ringing but she couldn't be quite sure. The only time she got up was to go to the bathroom and some days eat. Other days she just forgot, what was the point afterall.

She felt so much pain that she was just numb. She couldn't handle the pain.

I wasn't meant for this, not this type of pain.

She couldn't handle the agony of knowing that the one person she trusted and loved with all of her mind and body was gone. She had endured so much, but she knew when she was beaten, knew when she was outmatched. She could take broken bones, fire, screams, but this...this was something else entirely. It was all consuming, somewhere deep within the soul she hadn't realized she had had, that was irreparably broken. She hadn't realized when he became her everything but he had.

The nightmares came in cycles. She'd have visions of Vaz dying with

her not being able to save him, of a little boy that looked like the both of them dying, in explosions or of Elites and Brutes killing them both in front of her eyes. Of Dr. Halsey laughing at her and asking her why she had the audacity to think she could be anything besides a Spartan, telling her how special she was. Of being a little girl and having people take off her clothes and shave her head. Of her father crying angry, angry tears and telling her she was no daughter of his.

_And the baby. My only piece of Vaz and I couldn't keep that. I ruined it. Now I have nothing. I will be the first Spartan to die alone, in her bed. _

She touched the now clammy feeling sweatshirt weakly.

This will be my shroud.

It wasn't the blaze of fire and explosion that she had always imagined, but it was fine. The idea was starting to sound more appealing, slowly fading away until there was nothing left of her. Fighting was too hard at this point. She didn't have any more fight left in her. She'd given up all of her fight for humanity with blood, sweat, tearsâ€"she didn't have any left for herself.

She wondered, for the first time ever, really, about what what happened after she would die.

_Maybe I really am ready. Maybe this is it. _

It was a calming sensation, this resignation, this surrender. It was foreign-she'd never given up or quit anything, but this...there was comfort in this.

She closed her eyes, tired of staring at the ceiling.

She was walking through tall grass, but she knew she wasn't in the backyard. The place was overwhelmingly familiar, but she couldn't quite place it.

She saw a bus speed by...it was old, she hadn't seen one like that for a long time.

"Naomi."

She turned around, startled, and saw a woman with blonde hair and haunting grey eyes.

The same as her own.

"...Mom?"

"Hi sweetie," she smiled sadly.

Naomi recognized where they were. This was where she had walked home from school every day, where she had jumped into the water and been abducted.

"I don't remember you," she said honestly.

"Part of you does, otherwise how would we be talking?"

"Is this a dream?"

Her mother shrugged and picked a blade of grass absently.

"Dream, hallucination, spiritual connection to the afterlife," she said the last bit with a bit of sarcasm, "does it really matter?"

"But why you?"

She wanted Vaz. If Vaz really was dead, couldn't she hallucinate him happily?

Her mother was inexplicably closer to her now. She watched as the other woman raised her arm and traced patterns softly on the inside of her wrist.

"I took a razor to my wrists after you died. It was quick," she said wistfully, "I wanted to see you again, wanted to see my baby girl," her voice cracked and she reached out to Naomi's much larger hand and pressed laced their fingers together, "but you weren't there, you weren't gone."

"I didn't die," Naomi agreed. Her mother nodded and closed her eyes, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"No, you didn't," she smiled shakily and reached up to cup her daughter's cheek.

Naomi couldn't help but lean into her mother's touch. She didn't remember her well, but she remembered this, remembered this kindness, this feeling of love, despite the overwhelming sadness the memories brought.

"You can choose, Naomi, between death," she ran her thumb over her cheekbone affectionately, "or life."

"I don't know if I can choose," she closed her eyes tight, trying to keep tears at bay, even now she had a difficult time crying, "I just...I need him so bad Mom, just like I need air or water," her voice cracked, "my life without him is a joke, a useless washed up Spartan with no family, no attachments—he gave me life again, breathed it back into me and made something new. Without it I don't think I can exist."

"Try, you should try."

"Why? You didn't," she felt a little angry that her mom was telling her to live, to go on without him when the woman before her hadn't been able to do the same.

The ghostly grey eyes in front of her lit up and a true smile overtook her mother's face for the first time that Naomi could recall.

"Don't you see Naomi, you were alive, in choosing death, I took myself away from you."

Naomi's eyes widened.

Is he-

"Good God," a female voice murmured.

Naomi wanted to lift her head to look but it was too much effort. She felt disoriented and weak. None of her dreams had ever been like that, it had been more than that, simultaneously more real and surreal than anything she'd experienced before.

She couldn't really feel on her skin as someone moved roughly and quickly, pulling the sheets away from her. She didn't bother fighting, she was always cold anyways.

_You're stupid Naomi, you're a child telling yourself that he's alive when he's not, he's gone. _

The crippling feeling of despair washed over her, raw and new like the day she'd received that phone call.

The person undressed her without asking. Naomi didn't even have the strength to feel afraid. She didn't care. Her body was weak and her mind was fraying.

She was picked up and put in the bath tub.

Naomi recognized the woman as Sarah Palmer. She was brusque as she scrubbed her skin and hair. She trimmed her grown out fingernails and oiled her hair so she could undo the knots. She was rough in her movements, showing little care or affection, but she still braided her hair with shockingly gentle hands. Naomi wondered fleetingly if this is what having a mother was like. Had her mother done this kind of thing for her?

"Naomi, are you in there?" she asked her sharply. Naomi knew she should respond, that she was here but it felt hard. She hadn't spoken in recent memory.

Sarah huffed a frustrated sigh.

"Spartan, get it together, the Admiral has been calling you for a week and asked me to come here and make sure you were still even _here_, " she shook her head as if to say _how the hell did I end up doing this?_

"Your ODST is alive, Naomi, he was found last night."

Naomi felt confused.

"What?" she rasped, her voice scratchy from disuse.

"He's in rough shape."

_Vasya. My Vasya. Alive. _

"I need to be taken to him," she said quickly. It was all starting to come together.

I knew I would've felt it had he died. I would've known, it would've killed me right away.

That sounded silly even in her head but she knew somewhere deep down that it was true, that she would've somehow known if he'd been truly gone.

"He's at a medical facility on Mars but since you aren't married you can't be transported to him."

"The hell I can't," she was starting to feel rage cut through the cloudy, fog of near starvation and dehydration, "take me to the Marine liaison," she said quickly.

She was feeling the fight return to her, she could see color and light in the world again. She stood up quickly and stumbled as the room started to spin.

"Christ, you haven't walked or done anything for weeks, you need to regain your strength."

"I don't care," she shook her head stubbornly, none of it mattered, she would find him, she would see him, "I don't need that, I need to know what is wrong with my Vasya," she said determinedly. On her word as a Spartan, she would go to him. The world spun a little as she stood but it didn't stop her from making her way towards the door.

"I don't care if I have to walk," she spoke lowly.

Sarah looked at her. Naomi looked absolutely mad, nothing short of primal and crazed. She felt a little scared but quickly shoved her intimidation away.

She will walk there and pass out in the heat between here and the base.

She had no choice but to give her what she wanted.

* * *

><p>John woke up to Joan's arm sprawled lazily over his face, her mouth open slightly as she breathed deeply in her sleep.<p>

Since the explosion, Joan had taken to sneaking into bed with him and Cortana every night or so.

Cortana was strict enough that she would sometimes send her back, so Joan had gotten smart enough to come crawl in by him in the morning when Cortana had started her day.

He found himself sleeping later than he used to since Earth, maybe because the solar cycle on their planet was longer, or maybe because he secretly looked forward to indulging his sneaky little girl with the snuggles she liked so much.

He pulled the little girl close to him and kissed her softly on the cheek.

Joan smiled in her sleep and sighed, snuggling her Kelly bunny and up to her Father.

Life was as it should be, back to their home in the wilderness, far, far, away from Earth with its complex situations and even stranger memories.

Cortana was driving over to Kelly's this morning. She'd missed her friend and their almost daily interactions with one another. John and Joan were taking a lazy Sunday and she didn't have the heart to disturb them, but she had been far too antsy to sit around the house doing nothing.

She pulled up to their home in a subdivision. It was a nice house, though it looked pretty much identical to the ones next to it.

She punched in the code on the unlock pad and walked inside.

Their house was _completely _different since she'd last visited.

It was...messy?

Not _messy, _but just not so sterile and tidy as before.

Sam had toys strewn here and there, on a desk there were rolls of what Cortana assumed to be old time film laying haphazardly.

"Cortana, I'm in my office," she heard Kelly say from down the hallway.

Cortana walked in and saw three dress forms with fabric hanging off them and a whirlwind of drawings scatter on her desk.

"Wow, you've been busy," she said examining a rogue drawing of an evening gown.

Kelly chuckled and set down her pencil.

"Yeah, ever since Fred's photo series got so much publicity on Earth, fashion designers from all over have been sending me clothes to try and get me to do work with them, I'm too busy with school and Sam to do much, but occasionally I've been able to go to places in the system to do some stuff," she got up excitedly and showed her a half completed garment on one of the forms," but I'm pretty hard to fit, even when I send out my measurements, so I've started making clothes for fun, I might try and get it picked up if I like it, though my stuff won't fit many people that aren't Spartans, except maybe Joan when she's grown up and Sam if I hem some things here and there."

Cortana was a little surprised, first Fred with his beard and pierced ear pony-tail aesthetic, now Kelly as a model and clothing designer? And she'd thought she and John had gotten tame.

"This is really beautiful work, reminds me of the late forties," she said recalling what she knew of the structure of garments made around 2540, before the Spartan-IIs had been born.

"Yeah I've been really fascinated with fashion pre-covenant era, during the Human-Covenant war everything was quite utilitarian whereas now, in this post-war era you see a lot of different colors and design that almost seems inspired by a lot of the Covenant

ances," Kelly paused, "don't know exactly how to feel about that, but I have to admit some of their stuff is very beautiful."

A lot of that is really Forerunner influence, thought Cortana to herself slyly. Wasn't really something she felt like delving into with Kelly.

"I'll have to make you and Joan some stuff, Samantha loves all of this stuff," she smiled warmly.

"Speaking of, where are Kelly and Fred?" asked Cortana. She hadn't heard Sam running around or Fred playing with her.

"Oh they went to the park, Fred figured you and I would want some time to catch up."

"That was very thoughtful, though I do miss the both of them as well."

Kelly shrugged.

"How are you, I know you had quite a scare on Earth, I heard it was bad, mass casualties and everything," said Kelly flatly. Cortana couldn't blame her, she had seen so much worse, it was hard to expect her to emotionally connect with things of such a disturbing nature anymore.

That still didn't stop Cortana from thinking about the screams, falling through the air with John and Joan, the cut on Joan's cheek and how terrified she had been, how John had been shaken for the past week or so.

Kelly noticed her distant expression and her eyes softened slightly, realizing that the whole ordeal had been quite a bit.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to trivialize the whole thing."

Cortana shook her head. "No, no, it's okay. It was just...it was really scary Kelly, people areâ€¦" she thought about the Insurrection and about the Colonies, "people are very angry again, and that is just _scary."_

Kelly sighed.

"I understand the sentiment, I live here, I live in the Outer Colonies and I understand the frustrations that Earth can impose, but the fact of the matter is I have bled and watched people die for Earth, so I don't do well as an Insurrection sympathizer," her eyes got steely and firm, quickly back to the Spartan she still was, "but violence of that magnitude isn't going to accomplish anything with the Earth government, they either need to blow everything up and wipe it or give up," she said flippantly.

They both knew that she was right. Cortana knew that Earth would crush Insurrection again, no matter the unrest or the lives lost. They had abducted children last time to deal with insurrection, and Cortana knew there wasn't anything they wouldn't do to preserve their regime.

"I just wish that the unrest could be addressed, the Outer Colonies

_are _treated unfairly, there needs to be more cohesion," said Cortana wearily. She hoped that in years coming her hyperlight engine could help with this-if one could take a quick trip to Earth and to the Outer Colonies, perhaps there wouldn't be such a vast disconnect between the two worlds and more understanding between the two parties.

Kelly sighed.

"Let's not get too political, how is Joan?"

* * *

><p>"I need to know the medical status of Marine Sergeant Vasily Beloi," she said to the man behind the desk.<p>

"If I could see your dependent ID-"

"I don't have one."

The man shook his head.

"I can't tell every upset girlfriend who walks in here information, they would be lining up out the door."

Naomi was tired of people not taking her seriously and after fifty years she was tired of being told what she could and could not do.

"I don't _care _about your damn rules, I've put up with them my entire life," she yelled as she leaned over the desk and pulled the shirt of the liaison so he was close to her face.

"Tell me if my ODS is going to live through his surgery," she started shaking him angrily. "Tell me right _now!" _

She looked absolutely crazed, her eyes were wild and her nostrils flared. Sarah grabbed her and pulled her back from the liaison but Naomi reflexively whipped around, wound up and punched her in the face. Sarah felt her cheek bone crack and her jaw move out of its socket against the incredible force that was Naomi's carbide reinforced Spartan-II fist. She flew back a couple feet and nearly fell to the ground, stumbling to catch herself.

"How is no one taking me seriously right now? What do I need to do? Haven't I done enough? I deserve an answer!"

Naomi was shouting, her voice moving through octaves and developing a frantic, high pitched timbre. She was ready to leap over the counter and strangle the liaison. She wanted to start destroying anything she could with her bare hands. She was shaking with rage.

"He's in recovery," the man whimpered, "came out of surgery about an hour ago. Part of his calf muscle had to be removed and he needed to have his left eye flash cloned but it's looking like he's going to be fine. He led the rescue of the last five remaining hostages of the Human Covenant War and should be transported back to Earth tomorrow."

Relief. It was all she could feel.

Sarah watched a tear fall from the ghostly-pale Spartanâ€"II's eye and then watched as she fainted, hitting the floor without even trying to catch herself.

Sarah ran and checked her pulse. She was clearly exhausted. She looked at the liaison.

"If you don't speak a word of this to a soul you will be rewarded handsomely for your discretion."

From the expression on his face, Sarah was surprised he didn't faint too.

She was on an IV drip when she woke up. She looked around and ripped the IVs out, not caring that she spurted blood everywhere. She didn't like hospitals, she didn't like needles and she didn't like people poking her with things while she was unconscious. She felt better.

"Where you going, Valkyrie?," Sarah Palmer walked into her room in civilian clothes.

Naomi looked at her face and the deep purple bruise taking up a large portion of her face.

"I am...sorry I hurt you," she said softly. She wasn't sorry she had attacked, that had been instinct and should have been anticipated, but she was sorry that Sarah hadn't dodged.

Sarah scoffed. "You weren't in your right mind, I've had worse."

"I need to see Vasya."

"He lands in an hour. It's going to be a largely covered homecoming, his squad rescued a few high profile hostages and we haven't had something like this for a while, it's good for the UNSC and the general public."

Naomi didn't care. Not one bit.

That didn't mean that when she got there and saw the the fireteam and the hostage families there surrounded by cameras and journalists she didn't feel anxious.

There were husbands, wives, children, mothers, fathers...she felt out of place. She felt lonely. Vaz's mother was almost completely estranged and senile with crippling deterioration of her mind, so it was no surprise that she wasn't here. She may not have even known he was missing.

Sarah watched the older woman pace. It was strange, she had _never _seen a Spartan-II pace. They were always methodical, always in control. She had never seen one lose it in such a physical way. Sure, mental breakdowns weren't necessarily uncommon but she'd never seen one completely go nuts like Naomi had. Seeing the fragile looking blonde woman laying in bed like a bag of bones held together by skin was disturbing. She still looked gaunt with dark rings under her eyes, but there was a fire back that hadn't been there before.

Naomi saw what she assumed was his ship before everyone else.

When it landed, it felt like forever for them to dock. It wasn't for another hour that the hatch door opened.

It was a Navy ship, so she expected to see some fresh faced Sailor walk off the vessel to collect their ceremonial first kiss.

Instead, it was her Marine, hobbling on a crutch. He looked terrible, worse than he had after her father had beaten the shit out of him.

She was running, running faster than she had run in a long time.

She watched him throw his crutch to the ground and hobble to her as best he could. She lifted him off the right off ground and kissed him. She kissed him with an intensity she didn't know she possessed. It was hard and desperate and the most wonderful single thing she had ever experienced. He was here. He was here, he was alive, alive, alive and she felt him and she had thought he was gone and it hurt and the baby and everything. She pulled away from him and immediately collapsed into tears.

Everything she had been holding back since losing the baby came out. She wasn't able to form words. She simply held him and wept. She didn't care that there were at least a hundred people there.

"I thought you were dead, I thought you were dead for weeks." Her words were broken and came out as sobs. "You came back, you came back to me."

He grabbed her and kissed her. He touched her face and leaned into her, he couldn't stand well enough without her.

"_Zvezda, _of course I come back to you," he rasped. He was crying too and this was probably one of the few situations it was acceptable for a Helljumper to cry.

She continued to cry and kiss him on his cheeks, his brow and anywhere she could find. "I love you, I love you and you're an idiot and I love you." She couldn't stop saying it, it was all she felt. She felt overwhelmed with her love, with how much he mattered and how she could never, ever explain to him in words what he meant to her.

She held him for what felt like forever. She couldn't believe how lucky she was, that he was here and alive.

He was looking faint and wobbled on his feet.

Naomi gasped. "Let me help you," she said quickly picking him up as if he were a child.

He laughed weakly.

"I need to go to the hospital for in processing and care instructions. The rest of my in processing will wait for a bit."

Naomi blinked away her remaining tears and nodded.

Sarah watched as the Spartan woman carried her ODSST away from the crowd as if it were the simplest, most normal thing she could possibly do. She cut through the crowd of people without even acknowledging their presence.

Goddamn those Spartans are crazy about the people they love.

40. And now, for a ray of hope

Hey guys. I bet you've been wondering where I've been.

After Halo 5, I really didn't even know how to feel. To see a plot that I have cared so much about for years, to see a story that got me through such dark times in my life treated with such laziness and poor writing was nothing short of devastating to me. After my husband and I beat the game (which played beautifully, that's not the issue), I stared off blankly to a point above my TV not sure I could ever read, write, or enjoy Halo ever again.

I have been taking a break and thinking long and hard about all of this. I've just felt so crummy.

Last night I had a few glasses of wine, and I reread some of my work, and I read some of your reviews. You have all been so encouraging, and you've genuinely enjoyed what I've put out there. And you know what, I like what I've written too. It's not perfect, it's not polished, and it's definitely not canon, but it's my story, and I am going to continue writing it.

Give me some time to usher in the new year with my husband and friends, and I'm gonna get back to it. The characters we all know and love are still there somewhere up in my brain, and just because 343 decided to murder them brutally with sloppy writing, lack of character development and a blatant disregard for the Halo fanbase doesn't mean I have to give up on something that has given me, and so many others, joy.

Thanks for sticking with me. I hope that I won't disappoint you guys like 343 post Halo 4. :)

41. Chapter 41

I was BEYOND touched by your comments on my author's note. You seriously are what kept me going. I can't believe just, the outpouring of kindness from each and every one of you. I promise I'm going to try. Here is a long chapter. You guys deserve it. I promise that John and Cortana remain integral to the whole thing, paths will cross soon!

* * *

><p>Cortana hitched Joan up onto her hip tiredly. The girl was getting more than a little too heavy for her to carry around like this. She was at the grocery store and trying to work remotely at the same time with Joan, who for some reason insisted upon being carried today.<p>

"Joan, Mom needs to set you down, you're too big."

"No," she whined and snuggled into the crook of her neck.

Cortana sighed and grabbed a box of cereal.

"No, Joan, here, how about you sit in the cart," she compromised.

Joan sighed and nodded reluctantly as her mother set her in the hovercart.

Cortana absently passed her a book she had brought with to keep her entertained and Joan frowned at it.

'I'm bored of this one," she pouted.

"Just look at it until I'm done getting a few more things okay?"

Joan rolled her eyes and frowned, but she started paging through the book all the same.

Just when Cortana thought she was about to finish her conference call in peace, a message buzzed through.

"Dr. Hewn, can I call you back in a bit? I'll wrap this stuff up and get with you tomorrow. Yeah, okay, sounds good," she hung up the call and answered the other line.

"Doctor?"

"Cortana, can we talk?"

She felt a little anxious, she hadn't spoken to the Doctor in months, and she wasn't one to call out of the blue.

"Let me get out of the grocery store and I'll get back to you."

Cortana sent Joan up to her room to go and play. Sam was getting dropped off any minute now so Kelly and Fred could go to their respective jobs.

She sat down on the couch feeling entirely too anxious about calling the doctor back.

_Why don't I like her? _

It was confusing. Cortana couldn't help but feel both a disconnect and an awkwardness between the two of them. It made her feel guilty and strange.

Regardless of her emotions, she dialed the number and after a single ring the Doctor's face projected above the coffee table.

"Cortana," she said simply, though her voice sounded tired. Cortana could hear her turn down the ambient piano music.

"Hello Catherine," she said politely. "What's up?" She felt like

speaking less formally would help her.

The woman shifted awkwardly and Cortana watched her avert her eyes.

"...I'm ill."

Cortana silently beckoned her to continue.

"My...condition, is manageable, I have some years left but...I need assistance."

Cortana could see how much it was wounding her pride to even discuss the matter.

"I could hire someone but-"

"Let me talk to John," Cortana said softly.

She didn't know why she was saying it, didn't know why she was considering it, but she knew that be it in a year or five years, that this was it for the Doctor. It was part of nature, part of life. Cortana knew, already somewhere deep inside of herself that she had enough guilt to prevent her from letting the Doctor die alone.

She watched tears start to brim in the Doctor's eyes.

"...thank-you," she whispered, her voice trembling.

* * *

><p>Naomi nodded quickly, taking meticulous notes on what the nurses and doctors said Vaz's leg needed in addition to the treatments for his various burns and bullet holes.<p>

"He had shrapnel removed on his left buttock which will need cleaning and bandage changes every four hours, the leg wound should start to show improvement in a week or so with the medication but he will eventually need to come in for therapy with a cane shoe to help lessen the limp in his gait."

Naomi nodded. She already had a plan to color code his medications and creams based on the frequency they were administered and for what purpose.

"If you have any questions please don't hesitate to call. Thank you for everything you have done Marine."

Vaz simply nodded. Words were difficult in situations like that. What was he supposed to say, you're welcome?

When they got home Vaz was sleeping. She carried him into the living room and went up to her bedroom. Immediately she noted the dank, offensive smell the room had taken during her confinement. She frowned.

How could I have done that? I gave up.

She got to cleaning. She wanted the room to be perfect for Vaz and

his recovery.

You didn't give up, you broke. It was too much. You have seen too much, done too much.

The room was spotless by the time she was done. She made sure to make the bed using the softest sheets she had.

She went into the bathroom and started to organize all of the medications he needed, double checking her notes to be sure.

Once the room had reached her high standard of cleanliness, she went downstairs and carefully carried him up stairs. He was in uniform because an official homecoming like that had to look nice. Now he was home so she very, very carefully took off his clothes.

She felt pain looking at his leg. It was bandaged up but she could see the indentation and how a significant portion of it had been removed.

_He's going to limp for the rest of his life. _

She also knew that he must have gone without medical attention for a significant period of time for muscle grafting to be inviable.

_I'm sure he will tell me about it when he is ready. _

She dressed him in just a pair of basketball shorts. She wanted access to the gunshot wounds on his chest that would need tending to. She also noted the large bandage covering his left eye.

She tucked him into bed and she watched him sleep.

_You're home now and I'm never letting you go ever again. I wouldn't survive. And I'm a survivor. _

She watched him sleep for a few hours. She would silently undress his bandages. His calf was the worst, clean surgical cuts replaced what clearly had been a ragged, miserable wound.

_It looks as if something literally bit a part of his calf muscle.

_

He winced in his sleep as she gently applied salves and bandages.

She was exhausted. Around one in the morning she finally fell asleep.

A short few hours later, she woke up to groaning and cursing.

She didn't turn on the lights, she didn't like bright lights when she was in pain and she could see just as well without them. Vaz was writhing and mumbling in Russian.

"Vasya," she said gently, putting her hand on his. He swatted her away and let out a particularly painful sounding cry.

_His pain killers have worn off. _

She got up and scrambled to find the right medicine and double checked the dosage he needed. She wanted to make sure she gave him the right amount.

"Vasya, it's me, let me give you your medicine," she said gently bringing water to his mouth. He sputtered and spit as he continued to cry out in Russian.

She was starting to feel panicked.

"Vasya, my love, I need you to speak so I can understand, I need you to hold still long enough for me to give you your medicine, it will be okay," she tried to comfort.

"It burns," he said finally.

"I know, trust me, I really do, let me help." She could vividly remember multiple times waking up in excruciating pain from either plasma burns or even being flash thawed for the first time and feeling that her body was on fire.

He nodded and she was finally able to give him the pills. Immediately he stopped thrashing though he still looked very much in pain.

"Tell me a story," he rasped.

She frowned.

"I don't have any stories."

"Then tell me about you," he shivered, his voice trembling with the pain he was clearly in, "dreamed of you for months, just want to hear your voice, distract me until these pain pills kick in."

She sighed. He moved so his head was in her lap. She could feel him sweating and breathing heavily, clearly trying not to cry out, so she started talking quickly about the first thing that popped into her head.

"When Spartans turned thirteen, we were all given synthetic hormones that induced artificial growth spurts. We were all in the galley one day and Arthur tripped over his overly large feet and his food splattered all over him. No one looked at him of course but when we got back to our dormitory, Sam started laughing so hard at him until all of us started laughing and mocking him, imitating how he had tripped. It was the first time we had all laughed in about a year and it felt so, so good yet I remember feeling a bit guilty."

Naomi vividly remembered that crippling guilt. Now she couldn't help but feel bitterness at what she sometimes viewed as a wasted childhood.

She cleared her throat and continued.

"He just looked so ridiculous with his big hands and feet covered in hydration fluid and potatoes," she continued.

She could remember it all very vividly. She often had trouble with spontaneous recall of events, like her reunion with her father, people around her dying, but she allowed this memory to wash over her

instead of fighting it.

"It was a really happy day, the drill instructors started leaving us alone at night when we turned twelve so by the time we were thirteen we started to bend the rules ever so slightly when we could. John was the leader of my bay and Jeremy was the leader of the other bay, but John was really strict whereas sometimes I would hear Jeremy's bay laughing a little at night."

"I used to feel so jealous but I stopped when we would win, we almost always won because John was a better leader. When we would really stick it to the other bay in a big exercise John would let us take slightly longer showers or stay up talking a little bit. It was nice not to feel so lonely for myself, but Spartans like Serin and John were almost always solitary."

She could vividly see a tiny brown little girl with her food shielding her food as she carefully ate it, a red haired boy with freckles scattered across the bridge of his nose with sterner eyes than any twelve year old had business having.

"Sometimes John would talk to Linda, Kelly or Sam but he was almost always in his head. Sam was the one who always _got _him, sometimes Sam would talk for him, Sam could just tell what he wanted to say. Probably the only person to know him that well besides Cortana. John and Serin didn't get along very well, he was very mean to her when we were small children so she never really liked him. She was in the other bay though so I didn't see her quite as often, though I still saw her during classes, we would sometimes end up sitting next to each other because we were close in height. I had no idea what she would come to be to me back then, I don't think I really even understood life outside of Reach at that point."

Just talking about her ramshackle childhood brought with it a tension in her chest, both a welcome warmth and an uncomfortable anxiety.

"Am I being a bit of a boot talking to you about basic training?"

Vaz chuckled weakly. "That wasn't basic training it was your childhood. Tell me more, I like hearing about your life, what you were like when you were little," he clasped her hand in his and sighed, the pain killers slowly starting to do their job.

"I was quiet. I think I would be a much louder, more confident person if I hadn't been a Spartan. All of the Spartans were born leaders and born thinkers, but I think I was milder than the rest of them. You ever heard the phrase too many Chiefs and not enough Indians? I was an Indian in the Spartan ranks, I was quiet and I did my job and did it well. I never stood out. I still sometimes forget that I can speak my mind whenever I want now. Over the years, I've realized I actually have quite a lot to say."

"I can always listen," he said softly. He was asleep again. Naomi smiled and ran her hand over his head.

I know, my ODST. You always listen even when no one else will.

He fell asleep, the sound of her voice being the only thing he

dreamed of.

* * *

><p>"She wants to live with us?"<p>

"That was the general implication," Cortana sighed slipping on her nightgown and crawling into bed.

John didn't know how to feel about the whole thing.

He had so much baggage with the woman. He didn't like to think about it. He found that bitterness was an entirely useless emotion. He saw what it did to Naomi and the people who loved her, yet he knew he couldn't be as blissfully happy as Fred and Kelly, so it left him feeling something in between bitterness and complete indifference.

"Why hasn't she asked Fred and Kelly?"

Cortana raised a brow.

"You know why."

John frowned. He knew that the woman felt strongly for Cortana and especially him. She viewed them as her children, a concept John found relatively unsettling. He didn't dwell upon things, but he also acknowledged not only what the woman had taken away from him but what she had done to his mother and father.

That was the most difficult part for him. He didn't feel sorry for himself, didn't regret Halo, didn't regret Blue Team or Cortana, but he regretted that his mother had more than likely died thinking his death had been her fault.

Cortana watched her stoic husband slowly work out his emotions. If something was distressing, it usually took him a bit to work through it on his own. She knew it had to do with decades of repressing everything, then suddenly trying to live an emotionally well adjusted life afterwards, but that didn't make it any less strange. She knew that he still viewed any conflicting emotion or ideal as a problem instead of a natural part of human living, and that was simply difficult.

He shook his head slightly.

"We need to think about this longer. I can't make up my mind about what is best right now."

He thought of Joan and their perfect little family. What would the doctor's place be? Would she simply be an outside observer? No, she would somehow become a part of whatever he had here, and that imposition was not only difficult to imagine, he wasn't sure it was something he wanted.

Cortana ran a hand through his short hair.

"Sleep on it. We don't have too long to think though, I could tell that the situation was more urgent than she wanted to let on."

John grumbled his understanding and turned off the lights.

He laid in bed and in the strange moments between wakefulness and dreams, he thought of his mother's dark hair and toothy grin, her sweet voice and the scent of rosemary mixed with cigarette smoke.

* * *

><p>A few days later, Naomi had not let up on her strict care regimen.<p>

"Vasily, I need you to hold still," she scolded when she tended to the "shrapnel in his ass," as he liked to refer to it.

"Easier said than done," he grumbled.

"I know, trust me, I do, I'm almost done," she said injecting a liquid that would help dissolve the microscopic metal pieces that remained.

"That stuff is horrible," he complained.

"It breaks down metal, what do you expect?"

He propped himself up on his hand. "I think when people have nurse fantasies this isn't what they're thinking of," he said wincing as she finished the last injection and wrapped him back up.

She rolled her eyes.

He tried to flip back over onto this back but she stopped him.

"Nope, have to wait a half hour on your stomach so the injection has time to work," she said sternly.

"Why must you take such good care of me?" he complained, but she could hear the playfulness in his tone.

"Because you're all busted up and I need you to get better. And because your nurse at the clinic scares me."

He scoffed. "Please, you, afraid?"

"She had a mean voice, I don't like her," she joked.

"Are you doing anything today?"

"No, with Serin still gone I don't need to go to work."

"So you're stuck with me all day," he said.

She laid back down by him in bed and propped herself up on her hand.

"It would appear so," she smiled softly.

She looked at his face. He had his eye bandage taken off now and the long jagged cut extended from his eyebrow down to his cheek. The flash cloned eye looked like it was doing well though, he said he saw

a little better out of it than his old eye. She touched the side of his face gently.

"Mm, are you looking at how ugly I've gotten?" he asked softly.

"Shh, stop that," she said sternly.

"It's okay, you're pretty enough for the both of us."

She blushed slightly. He was rather generous with compliments.

"I think you're handsome," she said awkwardly. She felt weird commenting on someone else's appearance, but she really meant it.

He scoffed. "I look more like a hinge-head punching bag than anything else, not to mention I'm easily five inches shorter than you."

She frowned. "For one, if you were a Spartan you would also be tall and two, you do not look like a punching bag. You," she ran a finger gently over his old scar that ran from his right cheek and along his jawbone, "simply look brave, because that is what you are. Bravery is more handsome than smooth skin."

He always felt a little insecure about his face and he only felt worse after he had come back from this most recent deployment. Naomi was honestly the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She had perfect skin that all but glowed, she looked about fifteen years younger than she was mostly because her skin had almost never seen sunlight before she had retired. She looked perhaps even younger than he did and she was over ten years older than him.

She had never made him feel so bashful like this. When he had seen her naked for the first time, that was awe. He hadn't been able to understand how someone could be so, so perfect and so shy about it, but that was Naomi. He could still vividly recall her soft, pale skin, her fine blonde hair that looked like moonlight and felt like silk, the curve of her breast and her shy, almost demure expression.

_Fuck I'm getting hard just thinking about it. Stop, she just injected a bunch of chemicals into your bare ass. _

"It is a big compliment to be called brave by you of all people," he replied.

She raised an eyebrow.

"There's no question, you were brave before all of this, I've always known you to be brave."

"It's hard for me to accept compliments from you when I'm just some ODS in the middle of his third enlistment."

"Do you even know the things I have done? What are you imagining that's so much braver than the things you have done?"

He was quiet when he thought about it.

"I have not done anything that makes anything you have done look

trivial. I fought in the Insurrection as a teenager and that was a dirty and difficult war different than the Covenant in many ways. Other than that, the things we used to do made the 9-5 look a little silly," she held his hand and smiled at him.

"I love you," was all he could respond with.

She felt the now familiar wave of warmth, pleasure and happiness come over her.

She leaned down and kissed him on his brow.

"I love you too, you're my ODST," she chuckled. It had become a small joke between them since she had gotten flustered in front of John and called him her ODST instead of her boyfriend.

"You two are disgusting."

Naomi looked to the doorway and saw Mal leaning on wall.

"About time you came over," grumbled Vaz.

"I figured you both would be making eyes at each other for the first day or so, so I waited a bit hoping to miss out but here I am."

Naomi chuckled.

"I'm sorry Mal, we will stop 'making eyes'"

Mal thought it was funny that even though Naomi was a native English speaker she said things that sounded a lot like Vaz who spoke extremely accented English.

"So how do you both feel now that you're celebrities?"

Naomi frowned.

"Excuse me?"

"You haven't seen? Check this," he pulled out his tablet and sat on the edge of the bed so Vaz and Naomi could both see.

He pulled up a video. A tall blonde woman paced around.

Naomi blinked a few times.

"That's me," she said.

"Yeah watch," said Mal, clear enjoyment in his tone.

Naomi watched herself run to Vaz and start kissing him with desperation and passion she was shocked by.

"Check the title," Mal brought the screen to Vaz.

"Lady Spartan Welcomes ODST Home," he read aloud.

Vaz scanned the page.

"Holy shit," he murmured.

"What?," asked Naomi.

"This has been viewed 96 million times."

"It's only been three days!"

"You two are popular," quipped Mal, chucking his tablet on the ground. "Don't read the comments, there are a lot of very astute observations about your arse," joked Mal.

Naomi felt herself blush, it was a little unnerving to know that that many people had watched a video of her, let alone at a moment like that.

"Is it _that _obvious I'm a Spartan?" She asked softly.

Mal laughed. "Uh, yes, yes it is."

"I guess I just associate the public image of Spartans with the armor."

"Even without the armor there is no doubt, love. Just like most people can tell we are ODST, but that's mostly the pissy expression."

Mal stayed and talked with them for the whole morning. He made fun of Vaz and his shrapnel laden ass, and Naomi felt like she was back on _Port Stanley _with Kilo-5 making liquified yeast smoothies for huragoks and flying stealthily through deep space.

She felt normal.

The weeks passed by quickly. Naomi was persistent in caring for Vaz. She helped him with his physical therapy, she made sure his bandages were changed and she made sure that he was making as much progress as possible. She had him up and walking a few hours a day, well ahead of the schedule he was supposed to be on.

"This shoe is so heavy, it will take getting used to," he said as he hobbled awkwardly.

"It's pretty amazing tech though, it really evens out your stride."

She watched him as he walked with the most barely noticeable limp-with that much of his calve missing, she had been sure he'd have a noticeable impairment, but with the hardware he'd been gifted he walked so normally that it would've been difficult to notice without a trained eye.

"I'm just happy I don't have to walk with a cane like some _babushka_."

They walked outside as the sunset over the horizon. She felt an overwhelming sense of peace, walking with him as the sun faded into night and the stars of the early evening came out. They found themselves lying in the grass together, looking up at the stars.

She reached for his hand.

"Tell me about the stars, _zvezda_," he said quietly.

"I've told you everything I know about these stars."

"I know," he agreed. She'd told him every constellation in their skyâ€ she knew every story and every astronomer.

Nevertheless, Naomi smiled and did as he asked.

He closed his eyes and listened to the soft cadence of her voice. It seemed a little counterintuitive as she was explaining the beautiful night sky before them, but the heavens didn't compare to the sound of her voice for him. He just wanted to listen to her, he wanted her voice to be the only thing he thought of for some time.

When she was done, he opened his eyes and looked at her, her face illuminated by the glow of the moon and her long pale arms were wrapped up in his burly tan ones.

"This is a lot like the night you first kissed me," she said softly.

"I think of that as the night you _asked _me to kiss you," he teased.

Naomi smiled. She remembered that night clearly. That night was the first night she had felt so safe in his arms.

So much has happened since that night.

She frowned.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he toyed with a strand of her hair.

"A lot happened when you were gone," she averted her eyes, "I haven't told you because I've been so focused on helping you recover but there are some things I just...I think you should know about."

He nodded at her, inviting her to continue.

She took a deep breath.

"About two months after you had left, I found out that I was pregnant."

He cursed. "I heard about a bad batch of shots and it crossed my mind," he held her hand tightly, "did you go to the clinic?" He wouldn't have blamed her, and she was very clearly not pregnant right now.

"I was going to, I had an appointment and everything but the night before I," she swallowed, "I lost it."

"Naomi," he could see the pain in her expression.

"I know that I was going to get rid of it but somehow losing the idea of a child like that, it made me feel like a failureâ€"

Her voice cracked and broke off before she could continue.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that without me, I wish I could have been there."

She nodded, blinking away tears.

"Then when I found out that you were missing," she continued, her voice thick with the unshed tears, "all I could think about was what if that child had been the only thing I had left of you, what if you had been lost to me forever and I'd also lost your baby. I gave up and I stayed in bed for weeks. I thought I was going to die in my bed and Vasya the horrifying thing is I just _didn't care_."

He was speechless. He didn't know what to say, he couldn't imagine the strongest person he knew in that kind of position. He felt sick that he had made her feel that way but had their roles been reversed he knew wouldn't have fared much better.

He held her, not saying anything as she collected herself. There were no words he could say that would comfort her.

"Vasya," she asked quietly.

"Hmm?" he looked down at her.

"I think I wanted your child. I think I still do."

He had very quickly accepted that he and Naomi would never have children. He had even accepted that they would never have sex. All of those things had been fine with him. He understood that she took great issue with her body and having control over it after everything that had happened to her, and both sex and pregnancy were direct conflicts when it came to bodily autonomy. All he cared about was her happiness and that she felt safe and as loved as he could possibly show her.

"Are you...are you sure?"

She nodded.

"I have thought about it a lot since you've been home. I don't know what kind of mother I would be, I might be terrible...but I know that I want to have your child."

"You would be perfect," he disagreed.

She smiled.

"Above all of that, I want to know what it would be like for you to love me underneath the stars," she whispered to him lowly.

He had never heard her talk like that. He had seen her be coy or demure but never, ever intentionally seductive. Just the idea of what she was suggesting turned him on more than pretty much anything he had ever fantasized about.

"Really?" he asked, rolling himself on top of her. It had been so long since he had touched her. She kissed him and took care of him but any sexual touching had been quickly stopped by his ailing

body.

But that very clearly wasn't a problem anymore.

"There's no one around for miles, I would hear them," she said as she ran her thumb over his cheek.

He swallowed.

"With how sexy you look right now after six months of me and my hand I don't really care about other people."

She turned so red that she almost looked purple in the moonlight.

I love that I can make such a strong, legendary person like a Spartan blush.

The thought made him chuckle but he also couldn't help but think: _she isn't a Spartan to me, she's just Naomi. She's awkward, kind, beautiful and perfect. _

When she was nervous, she held her first, and only time, they had ever had sex she had held her breath and looked at him with those big grey eyes that he once had a difficult time understanding.

He had no doubt that she loved him. He had never doubted it, but seeing it so plainly in her expression and her movements floored him. He had always thought he would never receive love from her in a normal way. She wasn't normal, she didn't understand normal relationships or actions and he had been fine with that, he loved _her, _ whatever that entailed.

He had been right. She didn't love him like anyone else he had ever known, but the look she gave him was more than anything he could have imagined. Her intensity, her clear devotion to him was nothing he would expect from another human.

Vaz had slept with plenty of women, in pretty much every way someone could imagine. He had been with women who would shout and moan all while tossing their hair about and pawing at him, he'd been with women who didn't speak a word of any language he understood. He'd been with virgins, he'd been with other ODSTs, he'd had sex in the mud of a trench he had dug for overnight cover on nights he'd been sure he'd die when morning came. His past experiences, all varied and diverse, had one thing in common:

None of them were with Naomi Sentzke. Being with Naomi underneath the stars that she loved so dearly was an experience that couldn't be even remotely related to anything he had done before.

Naomi didn't do lust. Her eyes didn't look at him hungrily, she didn't rip at his clothes or climb on top of him and toss her hair in an exaggerated spectacle of pleasure. No, she was gentle, she'd wrap her fingers around his arms and touch him gently. Every time she looked at him he felt that she was trying to commit everything about him to memory, the way her gaze lingered and the way she would kiss every inch of him from his temple to the inside of his wrist, all she cared about was knowing him.

She was beyond the most beautiful person he had ever seen. He could

spend hours touching her soft, fine hair and days just looking at her smooth, pale skin. He found it easy to lose himself in the dips and curves of her body. Even more than that were her eyes. He had seen those eyes give looks that made him want to run and hide, he'd seen her overcome with deep sadness and even blinding anger, but when she looked at him, he could tell that she loved him with everything that she was. She was honest, she couldn't lie to him and she didn't want to.

He had given up on love before he had met her, given up on ever knowing someone and loving them the way he loved her. So many strange, superficial things could get wrapped up in sex. When he was with her, he didn't think about anything besides her and being with her. It was liberating to be loved so genuinely by someone, to be loved for who you were instead of what someone wanted you to be.

Want and desperation were foreign to her.

His touch felt overwhelming, so much so that it was almost painful but she could feel that something was missing, as if it just wasn't enough.

This is different than last time, this feels different. There's something more.

Last time had been exciting and new, but this time she was feeling sensations that she didn't really understand.

He touched her between her legs and she let out a slight moan before she could stop herself. She nearly covered her mouth in embarrassment and shame of it all. She felt mortified by her lack of restraint until she made eye contact with him and saw what surely was desire mirrored in his hazel-green eyes.

I want to know him, I want to understand how he makes me feel this way.

She was curious. She'd always been a curious person, even as a Spartan. Yes, she has accepted things as being what they were but that doesn't mean that she never wondered the how and why of most things, even if it was privately.

She found her hands moving over him softly, trying to get acquainted with his body that was so foreign yet somehow instinctive.

Maybe there is something about me that's still relatively human.

He was gentle and moved slowly above her, like he was still afraid that he was going to hurt her. She couldn't help but feel amused at how fragile he often thought she was physically, but she found herself simultaneously appreciating it. It was nice to be treated with tenderness when it's something she'd hardly ever known.

This is special. He is special.

Still, she couldn't help but feel that she was missing out on something, an integral part of the experience. She didn't want his gentleness, she wanted all of him, she wanted that desire in his

eyes, she wanted his brow furrowed and his hands clenched on her body. She wanted everything.

"You don't need to be so," she gasped slightly at the still foreign feeling of being with him, "gentle," she finished, sighing breathily as he moved.

The first time they had been together, it was nice, but mostly for the closeness and intimacy of the situation.

This was different. She felt something pulling from her navel all the way up her spine, a tension that made her squirm and writhe beneath him so blissfully uncomfortable she couldn't help but dig her fingernails into his shoulder blades. It replaced all the discomfort of last time completely.

What is this?

She was afraid. She couldn't help but try and fight it, whatever _it_ was. It made her feel like she was losing control, and she knew that only bad things happen when she lost control. Terrible, horrible things. She closed her eyes tightly, hoping the feeling would subside, hoping to anyone that was listening that she could just enjoy being with him.

She felt his hand on her cheek and his lips on hers, soft.

She opened her eyes and saw his. She gasped.

"Trust me, it's okay," he whispered.

_It's Vaz, I don't need to have control, we can be together, let yourself have this. _

And then it was different.

The intensity of the moment picked up again, only now it was all happening so quickly.

"Vasya," she inhaled sharply, "please, I..."she sat up and pulled him close to her, squeezing her legs around him and resting her forehead on his.

Feeling her grab him and listening to her breathy sighs make him question his disbelief in the divine. He could hear her breathing get irregular and he could tell she didn't fully understand what was happening. Finally, he felt her gasp and clench around him, trembling and crying out his name with desperation he never could have imagined, even in his most detailed of fantasies.

"Naomi!"

He rolled off of her and pulled her close to him.

"That wasâ€¦" she searched for words.

"That was unlike anything I've ever experienced," she concluded.

"You've never...?"

She looked up at him.

"No! I mean, no I haven'tâ€_hadn'tâ€_" she stuttered. She couldn't believe what happened, that someone else's touch could do that to her, unravel her so completely and so intimately.

"I get why they would make Spartans so they didn't want casual, impulse driven sex...that was," she searched for the right word and just started laughing. She felt giddy.

"Are you happy?"

"I never thought I would be able to experience that, I always thought that it would just be impossible unless I did what Fred and Kelly did."

"Didn't know I was that good," he chuckled. She slapped his arm.

"Don't get cocky," she laughed. She sighed and just laid there for a while, looking up at the sky with him, naked in the grass.

She felt like she was floating. Her entire body felt relaxed and even a little wobbly. Her arms felt heavy but in an extremely satisfying way.

I want that, I want that every day now. This is the big secret I've been missing out on.

"That was all of the excitement of jumping out of the sky without worrying that you'll die," she concluded after a bit.

"You deserve every bit of goodness that life has to offer," he ran his hand through her hair and heard her sigh. "And I have plenty of ideas on how to keep giving you that goodness," he said lowly in her ear. She felt herself blush warm again and yet the low swooping sensation sitting underneath her navel could only be described as excitement.

_What could be better than __**that**__? What else don't I know?_

There was so much she could learn about him, and it was an adventure that she was excited to embark upon. It wasn't about taking over someone's body, about harming someone, it was about using one's own body to love another, to learn about someone and oneself. All of the nerves that she had felt disappeared after he had made love to her. It was freeing to know she didn't have _this_ ruined, that _this_ was still her's and no one could take it.

She ran her hand up his arm and twined her fingers with his. She reached upward and traced an outline in the air, pointing at stars and connecting them with the path of their fingers.

"That's the Southern Cross, it's in a really good position for viewing this time of year for us, it's the most prominent constellation in the Southern Hemisphere," she tangled her legs up in his and rested her head on his bare chest.

Vaz grew up around plenty of crosses. His mother was still a devoted Russian Orthodox, dragging him to church every week and for hours on holidays.

Vaz had stopped believing in anything like that at the tender age of five when his father had disappeared. He had been angry. It was easier for him to think that there simply was no God rather than some asshole of a _God _sitting on some throne who took away his father forever. What greater purpose could that have served for him? For the world?

"Do you believe in God?" he asked without even really thinking about it. He felt like it was a really personal question that he would normally never ask.

She didn't speak for a few minutes. He assumed that she was simply not going to answer and that he probably shouldn't have asked. Right before he was about to apologize, she spoke up.

"I think I do," she said softly.

He felt a little shocked.

"But not in the classical conception of an all powerful deity that is simply man magnified. No, I don't think that's quite right," she traced her fingers softly over his chest absentmindedly, "But I think that what we do and what we think matters, I also accept that there are things that we simply _cannot _know or understand, and that these unknowables are some of the most radiant and beautiful things in all of existence," she paused, "I _do _know that there is goodness, and that there is truth, and in _that_, I think lies the divine."

It was once again a moment where he felt like she was simply _better _than the rest of humanity. He was again confronted by one of the many reasons she had been chosen for the Spartan program as a little girl. This time it wasn't her ability to run and jump faster than anybody, no, it was for a quality that despite being selected because of it, the Spartan program had sought to destroyâ€"her humanity. Despite the program's greatest efforts, they had never been able to crush what was perhaps the most brilliant and amazing thing about her. He was amazed that someone who had been so hurt, so crushed and so broken down could see goodness in others and the world around her. Her resilience, her intellect and her purely good nature were what made her the amazing person she was.

I could live a hundred years and never deserve this woman.

"Naomi?"

"Hmm?"

"Even if you aren't pregnant, even if you never are, will you marry me?"

His voice was even, calm and certain.

"Yes, I will," she replied simply.

* * *

><p>This has been a long time coming. Obviously y'all can see how
shit is gonna get complicated. I hope you all enjoy this long
chapter. Once again, thank you so much for everything.<p>

End
file.